

11-13-2025

Experiences and Training of Early Childhood Education Directors

Rochelle Elaine Nadeau
Walden University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Early Childhood Education Commons](#)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Rochelle Elaine Nadeau

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Amy White, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty

Dr. Frances Reed, Committee Member, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2025

Abstract

Experiences and Training of Early Childhood Education Directors

by

Rochelle Elaine Nadeau

MA, University of Colorado, 2019

BS, Ashford University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Early Childhood Education

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

In Colorado, early childhood education (ECE) directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams, which is integral to offering high-quality programming to children and families in the early years of development. Framed by Burns' transformational leadership theory, the purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences with training and support, as well as resources they need to lead high-quality programming. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 13 Colorado ECE directors from center-based programs that serve children from birth to 8 years. Thematic analysis using open coding yielded four themes indicating ECE directors (a) felt unprepared for an ECE directorship, (b) saw there were multiple paths to becoming an ECE director, (c) reported challenges with the time and economics of training and work life balance, and (d) need additional support specific to their position to ensure high-quality programming. The findings from this study may promote positive social change by providing ECE directors, policy makers, and the ECE workforce with ... to make decisions on best practices, policies, and credentialing, thus, supporting children and families in accessing high-quality early childhood programming.

Experiences and Training of Early Childhood Education Directors

by

Rochelle Elaine Nadeau

MA, University of Colorado Denver, 2019

BS, Ashford University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Early Childhood Education

Walden University

November 2025

Dedication

I would like to thank the Lord for granting me the wisdom and strength to complete my dissertation. I dedicate this dissertation to my amazing family, who have stood by me throughout all the struggles, emotions, and late nights. To my three children, you have given me so much love, support, and encouragement to reach as high as I can and achieve all my dreams to become the change I strive to be in the world. To my husband, I am grateful for your support, understanding, and love through this time-consuming and difficult process, especially for not allowing me to give up when things become hard. I would not have succeeded without you.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation could not have been completed without the support of my husband, Matt, and my children, Jeff, Kyle, and Austin.

I want to thank all the individuals who walked this journey with me. The committee members, editors, and especially Dr. Leonard Martin, who, at the times I wanted to give up, was my cheerleader and reassured me that I could do it. He gave me many unselfish hours of support to complete the many trials and tribulations experienced on this doctoral journey.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	iv
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	3
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	6
Research Questions.....	6
Conceptual Framework.....	7
Nature of the Study.....	8
Definitions.....	8
Assumptions.....	9
Scope and Delimitations	10
Limitations	11
Significance.....	12
Summary.....	15
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	16
Literature Search Strategy.....	18
Conceptual Framework.....	19
Literature Review.....	22
The Importance of Early Childhood Education	22
Defining Qualities in ECE Programs	37
ECE Directors: The Problems Faced	54
Improving the Performance of ECE Directors.....	77

Summary and Conclusions	86
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	89
Research Design and Rationale	89
Role of the Researcher	91
Methodology	92
Participant Selection	93
Instrumentation	96
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	97
Data Collection	99
Data Analysis Plan.....	101
Trustworthiness.....	104
Credibility	104
Transferability.....	105
Dependability	105
Confirmability.....	106
Ethical Procedures	106
Summary	107
Chapter 4: Results.....	109
Setting.....	109
Demographics	110
Data Collection	111
Data Analysis	111
First Cycle Coding.....	112

Second-Cycle Coding	113
Results	115
Research Question 1	116
Research Question 2	122
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	124
Summary	126
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations	128
Interpretation of the Findings.....	128
Theme 1: Participants Felt Unprepared for an ECE Directorship	129
Theme 2: There were Multiple Pathways to Becoming an ECE Director.....	131
Theme 3: ECE Directors Reported Challenges with the Time and Economics of Training and Work-life Balance.	132
Theme 4: Directors Need Additional Supports Specific to Their Position to Ensure High-Quality Programming	135
Limitations of the Study.....	136
Recommendations.....	137
Implications.....	139
Conclusion	143
References.....	144
Appendix A: Interview Protocol.....	178
Appendix B: Coding Table	183

List of Tables

Table 1. Sample of Open Codes	113
Table 2. Examples of Codes Into Categories	114
Table 3. Examples of Categories to Theme	115
Table 4. Theme Alignment with RQs	116
Table B1. Coding Table	183

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Leadership in early childhood education (ECE) is crucial for providing accountability, driving school improvement, ensuring stability to prevent turnover, and delivering high-quality programming that supports the development of children and families. ECE directors must follow and implement all mandates required to meet quality care and program requirements by the state and federal government. They are obligated to provide programming and care that is high-quality and to show stakeholders that this is happening in the programs that they oversee. Particularly in the United States, stakeholders use the information provided by ECE programs to consider changes to policies, future funding, and to determine if other supports are needed. When these decisions are made, they can influence the quality and services provided by ECE programs (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2021). When addressing the need for school improvements, ECE directors play a valuable role within their programs. They lead their teams by providing them with the proper direction through developing vision and motivating staff.

When ECE programs follow and implement quality assurance and improvements, these programs are then eligible to apply for state and federal funding and grant programs, which can lead to program improvements and ensure quality (Douglass et al., 2021). ECE directors must also pay close attention to preventing staff turnover. They avoid this by providing stability for the staff. Stability for staff is often achieved through the implementation of mentoring, coaching, building positive relationships, influencing teacher job attitudes, developing organizational expectations, setting norms, and creating

a positive climate. When ECE directors are provided with these opportunities, they can purposefully maintain resources, handle challenges, and make data-informed decisions that provide consistency and reliability to establish a supportive environment for staff (Doromal & Markowitz,2023). Many ECE directors do not possess the appropriate training, knowledge, or education in management or leadership (Burriss, 2020). ECE directors who acquire appropriate management and leadership training, knowledge, and education can obtain higher levels of training in leadership styles and skills, which helps them to manage the many changes they encounter and improve their leadership practices. These improvements result in positive outcomes for children, families, staff, stakeholders, and the community (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2023). Currently, there is a need to focus on the early childhood system that defines what makes an ECE director, including the specific knowledge and skills they should possess and what opportunities are needed, such as on-the-job experiences and coursework specific to leadership.

This study was necessary to fill a gap in practice about the development of ECE directors. This reflects the problem that in Colorado, early childhood directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. More information is needed on the roles and responsibilities that define ECE leadership. The understanding of what ECE directors specifically do to influence the center quality and positive outcomes for children's learning is narrow.

The major sections of this chapter include the introduction, background information, and an explanation of the problem. I discussed the purpose of the study and identified the research questions associated with the study. I explain the conceptual

framework and the nature of the study, followed by definitions that define the terms used. In the assumptions section, I present all aspects of the study that were true, along with the scope and delimitations of this study. All limitations and significance were presented to provide an understanding of how the study could potentially contribute to advanced knowledge in the field of ECE. I finished Chapter 1 by presenting a summary of the chapter with all main points being shared, leading to a transition into Chapter 2.

Background

ECE directors are expected to have a deep understanding of early childhood development and pertinent experience in an ECE setting. A gap in ECE directors' qualifications was identified in the Colorado Early Childhood Workforce 2020 plan (LeBoeuf et al., 2020). Colorado is currently revising policies to address ECE directors' limited knowledge and skills. According to the executive director of strategic planning for the Colorado early childhood education department expressed concern about these deficiencies among ECE directors

ECE directors must have a strong understanding of early childhood development and relevant professional experience in an ECE setting. However, there are inconsistencies in the understanding of practices regarding their preparation and experience in leading high-quality programs for young children (Myran & Masterson, 2020). These deficits lead to a need for further research into the professional development of ECE directors' practice gap in the understanding of the development practices of ECE directors. ECE directors are expected to hold educational leadership, administrative, and social skills. These skills include being responsible for social skills at the program and

outside of the program, making decisions about curriculum and implementation practices, completing evaluations for program staff, and handling all the program operations (Ford et al., 2024). Movahedazarhouligh et al (2021) stated that ECE directors regularly experience challenges to obtain these expected skills because of the absence of development needs for leaders and a lack of resources available to support workforce development. Additionally, inadequate preparation of knowledge and skills does not prepare leaders to provide quality support, training, or quality development. Overall, inadequate preparation occurs when ECE directors do not have access to prior training before becoming leaders.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020) National Governing Board adopted professional standards and competencies for ECE. These professional standards highlight the importance of ECE directors' knowledge of early childhood and professional experiences within ECE programs. It underlines that ECE directors need a core body of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions to practice effectively (NAEYC, 2020). ECE directors are crucial to successful childcare center operations. There is a need to focus more on ensuring they are adequately prepared and have the necessary experience to fulfill their duties effectively. This study was needed to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. I highlighted in my study the challenges that exist for ECE directors and how these challenges can be overcome. It is imperative to provide accurate findings related to the preparation and experience of ECE directors.

Problem Statement

The problem I addressed through this study was that, in Colorado, early childhood directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. A gap in knowledge about developing ECE directors was highlighted in this literature regarding the design and the role of preparation of individuals focused on becoming ECE directors (see Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2023). While strong leadership is essential for ensuring high-quality programming and effective administration, research indicates that current training and professional development pathways may not adequately equip directors with the necessary leadership competencies (Schaack et al., 2022). In Colorado, early childhood directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. For ECE leaders to become change agents, there must be more preparation, so they are able to lead high-quality teaching teams and provide high-quality programming for children and families (Rodd, 2020). Grantham-Caston and DiCarlo (2023) conferred with Rodd by presenting results from their research that ECE directors are missing administrative, professional development, and formal education to support the development of future leaders. Having higher professional knowledge, often not gained without support, is only a small part of being a successful ECE director. ECE directors must know how to use that higher professional knowledge to work with and motivate their staff and work with families to support student growth (Gibbs, 2020; Mason et al., 2025; Shore et al., 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. My focus was to gain a deeper understanding of the gap in practice in the development of ECE directors. This was achieved by conducting semistructured interviews to gather data on these concepts.

Using a constructivist research lens, I acknowledged that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds. I explored Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. It illustrates the specific training ECE directors received and how that training prepared them to lead teaching teams. The goal was to generate rich, detailed, and context-specific insights that can inform policy and practice in ECE. I was committed to giving a voice to the participants, honoring their experiences, and contributing to the body of knowledge in a meaningful and influential way.

Research Questions

Burris (2020) presented research describing that many ECE directors acquire a leadership role after being an ECE teacher; however, only a few of them have adequate experience and training in management or leadership. There is a necessity for a deeper exploration of how current ECE directors describe their experiences with training and development, and how current ECE directors in Colorado describe the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors to lead high-quality programming.

RQ1: How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe their experiences with training and development for their current leadership role?

RQ2: How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming?

Conceptual Framework

I used transformational leadership theory (Burns, 1978) to guide my study. This theory was used in the development of the data collection instrument, answering the research questions, and aligning the research questions with the problem statement and purpose. Transformational leadership is a theory of leadership that focuses on behaviors that empower, inspire, and develop others. In this model, leaders use transformational leadership practices such as leading by example and modeling both ethical and moral behaviors to influence members of their teams to gain respect and trust (Scott & Klein, 2022).

I used the theory's key principles, individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (Avolio, Bass & 1998) to design the interview questions. I also used the key principles of the theory when conducting inductive analysis in the initial cycle of coding, axial coding, and the emergence of the themes. I continued to use these key principles throughout the data analysis process to answer the research questions. Further explanation of the framework is detailed in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

I used a basic qualitative study to explore how, in Colorado, early childhood directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. Using this approach was beneficial for me to have a thorough understanding of the participants' perceptions, offering detailed insights into Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. Overall, I followed a basic qualitative design and focused on using semistructured interviews to gain a deeper insight into ECE directors.

I used inductive analysis and a two-cycle coding strategy to analyze interview data. This study involved the use of semistructured interviews with 13 directors from different center-based programs in Colorado. The focus were on understanding that in Colorado, early childhood directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. I used Quirkos software to support this process. Once I completed this process, I provided the finalized results and findings in Chapter 5.

Definitions

The following key concepts for this study are defined to help those reading this study understand the context of each term I used.

Center-based early childcare program: A center-based program is defined as the set of all ECE services to children from birth through 5 years, not yet in kindergarten, provided by an organization at a single location (Zaslow et al., 2024, p. 1).

Early childhood education: ECE is the period of learning that takes place from birth to eight years old (NAEYC, 2020a, p. 33).

High-quality childcare: The care and education of young children in a childcare setting that leads to positive outcomes for children (NAEYC, 2020a, Position Statement DAP section).

Assumptions

Beliefs that are deemed as being true without proof are defined as assumptions (Gruwell & Ewing, 2023). I made two assumptions for the study that are crucial to the research design and interpretation of the findings. I accepted these assumptions, although they have not been proven to be true for the study.

The first assumption was that the participants would provide honest and accurate responses during the interviews. Schmid et al (2024) suggested that “the validity of data and the findings is dependent on the assumption that dishonest or inaccurate responses may lead to false facts” (p. 1253). I understood the importance of establishing a trusting and open rapport with the participants, encouraging them to share their experiences and perceptions truthfully.

The second assumption as suggested by Schmid et al (2024) was that the participants “need to be knowledgeable about the phenomenon of the study, which is critical to collecting rich data for the study and having adequate information to address the research questions” (p. 1254). Knowledgeable participants can provide detailed data that can lead to “a deeper understanding of the research problem” (Schmid et al., 2024 p. 1267). Without prior knowledge about a particular phenomenon within a study, participants would be unable to share applicable and important responses. If the responses that are provided are not applicable or important, the findings would be

questionable, and it is doubtful that they would address the research questions (Schmid et al., 2024).

These assumptions were necessary to understand the phenomenon and address the gap in practice on the development of ECE directors. Knowledgeable participants who provide honest and accurate information may fill the gap in understanding ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. These assumptions also add to the validity and reliability of the findings and research outcomes.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study included exploring the fact that in Colorado, early childhood directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. In this study, I addressed the phenomenon of the ECE director role and the preparation of individuals seeking leadership in the field of early childhood. According to Grantham-Caston and DiCarlo (2023), only through appropriate training can these individuals provide high-quality programming through effective leadership. Schaack et al (2022) suggests that if ECE directors receive proper training, they will be able to contribute to high-quality programming; underscoring that effective leadership is necessary in ECE programs, but in Colorado, ECE directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. It is important to focus on ECE directors in Colorado because only those with knowledge of the field and the role of ECE directors can provide the information necessary to develop well-prepared ECE directors who lead teaching teams and provide opportunities for positive outcomes for children and families.

I selected ECE directors in Colorado who were qualified by the state PDIS system (Colorado Shines) and who work at a center-based program in the specific area where the study took place. These directors had to possess some education or training in leadership. ECE directors who were not qualified by the state of Colorado were not eligible for my study. I was interested in exploring Colorado ECE directors' experiences and their perceptions of the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors to lead high-quality teaching teams.

Limitations

Limitations in research, as defined by Burkholder et al (2019), are considered a deviation from the intent of the design and method of a study, which cannot be bypassed. Three types of data sources can be used in qualitative research. These are observations, pulling documents, and interviews. Using only one data collection source creates a methodical limitation, as it can affect the quality and amount of data that can be collected. Transferability refers to the degree to which the results of research can be generalized to different populations with varying contexts (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The sample size of the population is a limitation related to the research design of the study. A small sample size limits the transferability of the findings of the study. I used the developed research questions and interview protocol that included probing questions to obtain a vigorous exploration of the study problem while maintaining a quality sample size. It can also affect the dependability of the study, as the small population size can influence the stability of the data. I paid close attention to how data were collected, ensuring dependability relative to the research questions presented in the study remained

stable over time. To provide dependability to the study, I also conducted member checks of preliminary findings to determine the accuracy of the data while allowing participants the ability to add to or omit from their initial responses to enhance the dependability and validity of the findings. I addressed these limitations by collaborating directly with my committee chair to review my work, including the data findings of the study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) define researcher bias as the researcher of the study deliberately or inadvertently altering the results of the study. I believe that many ECE directors are not prepared. This can influence trustworthiness of the study. To address this bias, I conducted member checks and provided further details of the member checks in Chapter 3.

Significance

This study shows a detailed account of ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality teaching teams. The findings gathered from this study were used to fill the gap in practice while providing factual, supportive literature to inform stakeholders, legislation, and higher education professionals for the development programs and curriculum. Exploring directors' preparation and leadership experience in the study strengthens the literature on leadership tracks, training framework, and the role of professional development in ECE programs (Douglass & Kirby, 2022; Myran & Masterson, 2020). Many individuals in early childhood leadership positions have received one-off training that is often insufficient for supporting evolving practices along with varying approaches within professional development (Shore et al., 2021). Ford et al. (2024) found that ECE leaders

faced high work demands, limited opportunities for professional growth, and well-being challenges; elements that directly influence their leadership effectiveness and program quality. Fu (2022) conceded, highlighting that successful leadership in ECE is influenced by distributed and didactic models, which include reflective learning and collaboration, but are difficult to develop without continuous training. Furthermore, inconsistencies and a lack of professional development often negate building on existing knowledge, obstructing ECE directors' capacity to direct teaching teams and deliver high-quality programming (Schoch, et al., 2023).

Both current and future ECE directors, policy makers, and other stakeholders may observe the findings as an illustration of a need for additional training and resources to develop competent directors who are more equipped to promote high-quality teaching teams while also providing unbiased learning opportunities for children. These findings could guide the development of statutes, higher education curriculum, and stakeholder actions that align with the elaborate demands of ECE leadership. (Douglass & Kirby, 2022). Additionally, Fu (2022) suggested, based on the findings of his study, that to execute professional and successful leadership in ECE, there is a need to improve the qualifications of the leaders in their respective programs. A focus on upholding positive relationships with all stakeholders would allow more cooperation and sharing of ideas, opportunities, and the leader would be able to reflect on their learning and experience to evaluate if it was successful.

Within the field of early childhood, this study has the potential for meaningful social change by influencing leadership behaviors, professional development systems,

higher education pathways, and outcomes for children and families in the studied region. Lee et al. (2022) highlighted that the interconnected factors significantly influence the quality of programming and leadership in center-based programs. The results of the study adds to the existing literature by highlighting leadership shortcomings and promoting coordinated training and mentorship, underscoring the importance of empowering ECE leaders. Fu (2022) added to the discussion that strategies for quality require an attitude by the leader to change things socially, along with the leader's behavior would lead to the development of systems and higher education pathways. It was suggested by Ford et al (2024) that high quality teaching teams and competent directors approach learning without bias when presenting opportunities may lead to a commitment to social justice. In relation to empowering ECE directors in the implementation of enhancements within the system, Ford et al highlight that exposure to a supportive work environment that provided autonomy, relatedness, self-care supports, along with clear and open communication from supervisors, resulted in higher job satisfaction and well-being. They further revealed that the participants of the study shared that "as leaders," they were given access to professional job resources that included coaching, mentoring, and feedback; there was a consensus that this was critical to a leader's professional growth Ford et al summarized their findings to conclude that the elements of a supportive work environment and professional growth opportunities led to the leader's well-being, effectiveness of directing their teams, and the achievement of educational outcomes for children. Adding to this, when strategies for quality are implemented by leaders, educators have job satisfaction, and this reduces burnout and turnover. When supportive work environments

and professional growth opportunities are embedded within the ECE organizational structure, it can have long-term advantages for ECE directors, children, and the community (Douglass & Kirby, 2022; Fu, 2022; Lee et al., 2022).

Summary

The preparation of ECE directors is integral to the successful development of high-quality teaching teams and programming. In this chapter, I included the introduction, background, and an explanation of the problem and purpose of the study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality teaching teams. In Chapter 1, I discussed the purpose of the study and the developed RQs. I explained the conceptual framework and the nature of the study. I defined terms that have multiple meanings or are used specifically in ECE. I provided the assumptions, the scope and delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study, including how the study may contribute to social change. I included the main points before transitioning to Chapter 2.

Chapter 2 contains a detailed review of the literature that is related to the study. I focused on a detailed explanation of specific literature, search strategies used, and the conceptual framework of the study. I provided an extensive review of recent literature that was related directly to this study. I included information on how other researchers have solicited specifics to the problem and presented an appropriate justification from the literature that supports the need to conduct this current study. I amalgamated the literature in Chapter 2 and provided a summary and conclusion to the chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

It is widely confirmed by early childhood proponents and educators that early childhood is an important time to focus on learning for children (Schoch et al., 2023). Children who attend preschool develop vocabulary skills easier, engage in cooperative play, and participate more than children who did not attend preschool (von Suchodoletz et al., 2023). When examining the long-term outcomes of children who attended preschool, these children were less likely to need special education services and were more likely to graduate from high school (Davis & Sojourner, 2021). Because of the emphasis on the early stages of development and lifelong outcomes of academic success as they relate to preschool attendance, it is important that ECE programs provide high-quality care (Nigro & Ward-Seidel, 2024).

The problem I addressed in this study were that in Colorado, early childhood directors are often not fully prepared to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. High-quality programming is contingent on the provision of effective leadership (Gibbs, 2020). Douglass et al (2021) concurred, stating that leadership and a focus on quality assurance and improvements furthers the development of professionals, strengthens educator effectiveness, by allowing for funding to support training and professional development which is a key strategy for meeting quality. Addressing leadership challenges in ECE through system-based approaches ensures long-term sustainability and positive influence on children's learning experiences. In fact, Schaack (2020) stated that many ECE directors were found not to be prepared to lead and develop high-quality teams when first becoming an ECE director at a program. Due to the lack of preparation

to lead, they experienced lower capacity to be involved in their work in a meaningful manner, focusing on quality improvements due to occupational and emotional exhaustion to a level that they considered leaving the job. In further support of this, Talan and Magid (2021) underscored that though some ECE directors possess a bachelor's degree, many of their degrees are not in ECE. Without ECE leadership training, ECE directors may be less effective in supporting staff, directing teams, making informed decisions regarding programming, and limiting outcomes for children.

Based on these circumstances, I sought to address this gap by examining the experiences of current ECE directors. Using transformational leadership theory as a framework to explore the training and support received by directors, together with their ongoing needs. Understanding these experiences is essential to designing professional development opportunities that truly prepare ECE leaders to develop quality teaching teams and build strong organizational cultures, which can only be achieved by a better understanding of these experiences.

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences, as well as the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. Investigating these topics from the perspective of current ECE directors will help further establish active directors' current level of expertise. This qualitative research expands on the existing research involving director education levels and focuses on the directors' perspective of what they need to succeed. Findings from this study may help prepare incoming directors and create more efficient and effective early learning centers.

In this chapter, I provided the context for both the conceptual framework and essential themes in the literature related to ECE and the role of directors. The conceptual framework is presented first. I discussed literature focused on improving systems and outcomes for ECE programs and what makes a successful director.

A review of the literature revealed five themes that were discussed in depth in this chapter, including (a) the importance of ECE, (b) defining quality in ECE programs, (c) ECE directors, (d) problems faced by ECE directors, and (e) past research on improving the leadership performance of ECE directors. Finally, the results of this literature were synthesized, and a conclusion is given that explains how the focus of this study functions within the existing literature.

Literature Search Strategy

Using The Walden Library, databases used to conduct these searches included JSTOR, Research Gate, Google Scholar, ERIC, and EBSCO. The search terms for the literature review included *early childhood education directors, early childhood educator needs, resources available to early childhood directors, the importance of early learning education, developing leadership skills in early education directors, requirements of successful early education directors, parental expectations of early childhood education, parental expectations of school administrators, transformative leadership theory, understanding transformative leadership theory, history of transformational leadership theory, strengths of transformational leadership, and comparing transactional and transformational leadership*. All sources were peer-reviewed or from other reputable sources, such as government reports. Additionally, all sources were available in English.

Most sources were from within the last 5 years, with older sources being seminal works vital to establishing theory or the foundation of these fields.

Conceptual Framework

Transformational leadership theory, the conceptual framework for this study, was first developed by Burns in 1978 to distinguish between two distinct leadership styles: transformational and transactional. This theory was supported by Bass (1990), who noted the organizational dynamics around transformational leadership theory. Transformational leadership theory includes two forms of leadership: transactional leadership, which uses rewards to achieve outcomes, and transformational leadership, which uses inspiration to achieve desired results (Burns, 1978).

Avolio and Bass (1998) expanded the concept of “transformational leadership to include 4 components: (a) idealized influence, (b) inspirational motivation, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized considerations” (p. 7). Idealized influence happens when leaders improve the work their employees’ conduct by communicating about shared values and goals, exhibiting confidence and dedication, while serving as a role model in the workplace. Inspirational motivation constitutes a shared vision that guides employees in working together to execute company goals (Alegbeleye & Kaufman, 2020). This leadership approach makes teams work better together and gets people more involved. Closely related to inspiring motivation, idealized influence further supports a leader's ability to inspire trust and commitment among employees (Khan et al., 2020). Inspirational motivation can be created by idealized influence and is key to moving a team toward a common goal. With this common goal, employees can be

brought into more dynamic roles, leading to the next component, intellectual stimulation (Jackson, 2020), which is used to bring employees' perceptions into the problem-solving process. When employees are brought into the problem-solving process, they can expand their knowledge of common occurrences and how to manage those occurrences in an environment where the employee can be supported (Jackson, 2020).

The final component of transformational leadership theory is individual consideration. Individual consideration is where employees are treated individually according to their needs (Jackson, 2020). Leaders coach and support each person differently to reach their full potential (Chen & Wu, 2020). These four components constitute the foundation for the influential nature of the transformational leadership theory (Chen & Wu, 2020).

Both transactional and transformational leadership are influential leadership styles. For example, both leadership styles are shown to transform teams (Changar & Atan, 2021) positively; however, there are stark differences between the two leadership styles. The primary difference is that transactional leadership emphasizes the exchange of task-related actions and rewards between leaders and followers. In contrast, transformational leadership focuses on aligning organizational goals and motivating followers through positive modeling (Thompson et al., 2021). Although differences exist, both leadership styles may positively influence employees. In addition to motivation, both transactional and transformational leadership influence interactions between parties (Susanto et al., 2023). In an employee/employer situation, transactional leadership can help employees care for their basic needs and feel appreciated, while transformational

leadership can build strong relationships between leaders and employees (Susanto et al., 2023).

Several studies have examined the effectiveness of transformational leadership theory as an effective means of leading and motivating. Research has shown that in leaders who engage in transformational leadership, their followers are more likely to use their strengths and take the initiative, and in childcare transformational leadership, it has been positively associated with teacher retention. When teachers feel valued and supported by their leader it can influence whether they stay or leave (Bakker et al., 2022; Doromal & Markowitz, 2023). Researchers have also questioned whether transformational leadership theory is outdated and ineffective due to a perception of leadership as an "either/or" split that is detrimental to effective leadership. However, these studies, although sometimes calling for the moderation of transformational leadership style (Kwan, 2020), acknowledged that it is still an effective method of leadership.

I selected Burns's (1978) transformational leadership theory as the framework for this study because it best connects the learning needs of current and future directors in ECE. Transformational leadership brings about change by inspiring others to follow, which is how directors can improve themselves and their teams (Bakker et al., 2022; Doromal & Markowitz, 2023; Susanto et al., 2023). With the challenges teachers and leaders face in the field, a focus on the attitudes of the job plays a key role in the future of high-quality programs and the formation of future leaders in the field (Purper et al., 2023). The ECE field is continually changing, and individuals within the leadership role

need to focus on leadership influence leading to job performance, avoidance of burnout, and the ability to evaluate staff members. This theory was used to develop interview questions and to collect and analyze data to inform others about what current ECE directors' experiences are with training and development they have in their current roles, as well as what support, training, and resources they report are needed to develop ECE leaders and create and lead high-quality teaching teams.

Literature Review

In this review of the literature, the current research is split into five different sections, each exploring one of the five themes: (a) the importance of ECE, (b) defining quality in ECE programs, (c) ECE directors, (d) problems faced by ECE directors, and (e) the research that has been done on improving the performance of ECE directors. This chapter concludes with a summary.

The Importance of Early Childhood Education

Children participating in ECE programs need high-quality care and education in the early years (Schoch et al., 2023). Attending a competent ECE program can influence a child's development significantly in areas of brain development, physical and psychological readiness, which includes social, cognitive, and gross motor skills, and early literacy development. All of these play a crucial role in preparing children for formal education.

Burchinal and Farran (2021) argued that one of the primary functions of an ECE program is promoting cognitive and social development, which reduces achievement gaps. Additionally, a key goal in preschool is the importance of future reading

comprehension which is especially true for dual language learners. Linking this to brain development, bilingualism supports brain development by enhancing the processing demands of self-regulation thus also linking it back to vocabulary development and language mixing. DePasquale and Gunnar (2020) further emphasized that childcare educators have a positive influence on children's development that can offset some of the influence of potential parent maltreatment that we may see with children in poverty, especially since sensitivity in preschool years were found to predict the development of brain areas involved in learning and memory. Children's development is contingent upon early literacy skills, including phonemic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, and print awareness, and is crucial for children to succeed academically (Herrera et al., 2021). All these elements have a long-term influence on children's developmental progress and academic success.

Foundational Roles of Early Childhood Education

ECE has a large influence on young children's development from birth to 5 years of age. The education provided during this critical time of development should be designed to promote a safe, nurturing, and predictable environment which can precipitate the development of children's social skills (Hemmeter et al, 2021). Children first learn about emotions at home. Social emotional learning begins in the child's home. The purpose of high-quality early education programs is to extend on this social emotional development. The programs need to have teacher-child interactions implemented into the core of the programming and exposure to repetitive play opportunities, which are needed

to support learning and positive well-being of the children attending these programs (Blewitt et al., 2020).

Play is an important developmentally appropriate practice in ECE programs to develop social-emotional skills and learning development, such as how to share, agree with others, and self-regulate in upsetting situations (p.129). These skills are developed through participation and observing socially in ECE programs (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). However, when children miss these important opportunities, they may encounter challenges as they progress and transition into formal education. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many young children did not attend ECE programs, which influenced their social skills development (Egan et al., 2021). This lapse in their development confirms the importance of ECE in shaping children's futures (Egan et al., 2021).

Brain Development

Brain development during early childhood has a profound influence on lifelong outcomes. Children's early experiences play a crucial role in supporting the formation of their developing brains, directly influencing their emotional regulation, physical health, and capability to thrive in learning environments (Pettoello-Mantovani et al., 2025). As Williams and Mulrooney (2021) highlighted, these basic interactions fundamentally influence long-term outcomes and readying children for school with a focus on mental wellness and life success. Forming healthy relationships advances the opportunity for rich play and exploration that supports development and learning. Positive interactions with caregivers that are nurturing and safeguarding with children support the most sensitive

time for brain development for infants and toddlers. By developing the architecture of the brain, children develop life-long learning skills, build relationships, and solve problems. The experiences in ECE are critical to social-emotional well-being and promoting healthy relationships. Adversity can interfere with healthy development; however, attendance in a high-quality learning program can promote resilience and avoid an increased risk for mental health disorders due to relationships with caregivers that are nurturing and responsive (Gee & Cohodes, 2023). Osher et al. (2020) highlighted the significance of early education in influencing psychological resilience and behavioral health. Educators, parents, and caregivers are very important for helping young minds grow and developing their brains in the best possible way.

Adverse childhood experiences during sensitive periods of brain development can lead to both short-term and long-term physical and mental health issues if not addressed early (Bhutta et al., 2023). Luby et al. (2020) explained how adversity can shape emotional and cognitive development through its effects on the brain. Adverse childhood experiences include experiences such as violence, abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. These events can influence a child's development and affect their health and well-being throughout life (Bhutta et al., 2023). Early identification and supportive interventions are essential for improving trajectories, and the ECE setting offers a rare strategic context for this work. ECE professionals, when equipped with trauma-informed and equity-centered practices, are better able to recognize signs of adversity, respond with relationship-based care, and provide appropriate supports that combat toxic stress

and promote resilience (p.2630). This highlights the important role of ECE in fostering learning and advancing systemic well-being and family stability (Starr et al, 2025).

The environment in which children spend their time also plays a significant role in their brain development. Lopez et al. (2021) stressed the link between early life experiences and brain maturation. Early childhood professionals have an important role in preventing adversity by providing safe environments, giving positive attention, building strong relationships, acknowledging the feelings of young children all foster resilience in young children. Providing responsive care, access to positive caregivers; builds positive and nurturing relationships (Herndon & Waggoner, 2021). These settings lay the groundwork for lifelong learning and social development, which is highlighted by Correia et al (2023) and Hayes et al (2022), as well as linked to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory on development.

The early years of life equate to a period of unprecedented brain development, from which children are influenced by the environment and relationship experiences. Osher et al. (2020) completed a project highlighting how neuroscience and early childhood are connected, citing supporting literature from neuroscience that shows brain development happens most rapidly in the early years of life and stressing the importance of this period, reinforcing the need for high-quality early learning programs. NAEYC (2020b) collaborates with the ECE profession and is committed to advancing high-quality, is evidence-based, implement developmentally appropriate practices and foster learning. All these are critical to supporting children in the early years of development and promote later academic development and success.

Physical and Psychological Readiness in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood educators play a crucial role in preparing students both physically and psychologically by providing a range of educational opportunities. For instance, daily routines that include having children practice physical movements such as running, hopping and skipping encourage physical activity which develops emotional comprehension, self-regulation allowing them to focus and follow instructions. (p.2024) These can include activities such as physical exercises, math games, stretching or throwing a ball. It can also support children in developing skills in remembering directions, taking turns and paying attention which are crucial in early childhood (McGowan et al., 2023). It is important to note that physical activity, such as yoga, can support social-emotional regulation through neurobiological evidence (the release of endorphins and serotonin), which influences emotional and behavioral regulation, thus enhancing resilience and the ability to manage and reduce stress. The findings of the highlights that yoga has positive effects on psychological, cognitive and physiological outcomes in children (p.1338). There were also noted improvements in self-esteem, self-regulation, social competence, resilience, mindfulness, cognitive and functioning and executive function. (Miller et al., 2020).

The development of physical readiness in early childhood is linked to the development of executive function (EF), which includes inhibitory control, and working memory which are crucial and need to be developed by age 5 prior to children entering elementary school. Physical activity has a positive influence on EF overtime, specifically when it is moderate to brisk in nature. Physical activity also supports cognitive

development and forms of cognitive shifting. When physical activity is inconsistent in the formative years it influences children's mental health and lifelong health outcomes. It is important to note the importance of the role quality sleep plays in EF. When quality sleep is combined with physical activity it can support the development of EF skills. Educators help children learn these skills purposefully by doing things in the classroom that help them learn how to control themselves, solve problems, and work together with others. Phillips and Tucker (2025) confirmed that physical activity contributes to EF development, enhancing cognitive flexibility and attention control.

Research emphasized the significance of structured movement-based activities in the development of EF skills. Phillips and Tucker (2025) discovered that preschoolers who participated in regular physical activity demonstrated enhanced working memory and self-regulation, and that it is critical in supporting motor skills, nurturing social communication, cognitive development and noted that more than half of preschool children do not meet the physical criteria needed underscoring the need for movement-based learning in early childhood environments.

EF is needed to focus on attention, filter out distractions, retain information and engage in self-monitoring which influences young children's learning and development. EF begins developing in the first year of life and peaks at the age of 3-5 years and leads to higher thinking in adults. Wei et al. (2024) used a meta-analysis study to examine if physical activity influences EF. They shared the importance of physical activity in the development of EF and noted that EF is needed for children to learn to focus their attention, filter distractions and retain information which then supports learning and

development. When children are provided opportunities to experience physical activity in the early years, the results from the study confirm that it supports the development of higher order thinking.

Educators are responsible for providing high-quality learning environments and the development of EF. EF has been considered the “biological foundation of school readiness and is enhanced in early childhood settings” (Muir et al., 2023, p.3) which has been noted that it helps develop cognitive social and emotional skills. Waiting for a turn during a game helps children learn self-control by requiring inhibitory control, while playing games, reading books, and completing puzzles, building further skills that lead to school readiness and are supported by EF which assists children in remembering information, being able to follow rules. All these skills are critical for children to be ready for school (Muir et al., 2023). Cankaya et al (2023). added to the discussion, noting that pretend play, role-playing, access to loose parts, fine motor exercises along with physical activity promote cognitive flexibility also known as inhibitory control helping kids be more flexible in their thinking, which helps them deal with new situations.

High-quality ECE programs offer opportunities for children to improve both physical activity, cognitive activity, and psychosocial health while also supporting physical health through enhancing their sleep quality. Napping which is a part of physical health for preschool children has been found to be beneficial for children in early childhood and it supports brain development (St. Laurent et al., 2022). Comparatively, educators can challenge children's thinking and provide cooperative games to develop working memory (Wei et al., 2024). It is important to understand how poor psychosocial

health development can influence behavioral and academic readiness, often causing children to fall behind. Psychological readiness was also an important part in academics and can lead to future difficulties psychologically and academically to include adverse influence on life-long wellbeing. Social-emotional development plays a vital role in the development of self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness and responsible decision-making. This area of development influences how children build secure relationships and learn to regulate their emotions, leading to feeling safe to explore environments illustrating the of social emotional development (Mondi et al., 2021). Ultimately, the development of executive function and psychosocial health supports children by developing their mental and emotional capacities. As children are introduced to new experiences, learning, and playing with other children, social-emotional learning plays a pivotal role, suggesting that ECE should focus on developing healthy personal relationships, helping children develop their cognitive capacity, problem solving and creative thinking skills and succeeding in school; mental and emotional development is crucial to this development (Greenberg, 2023).

Early Literacy

Over the last 20 years, a lot of research has been conducted on early literacy, which is an important part of ECE. Hererra et al. (2021), in their summary of the effectiveness of early literacy instruction, highlighted substantial evidence of the influence on literacy outcomes. They said that early literacy encompasses more than just learning to read and write, it also develops language skills, phonetical awareness, print knowledge, decoding early writing skills which are important in language and literacy

performance and early predictors of later language and literacy development. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of educators in implementing effective early literacy education, suggesting that well-designed, evidence-based literacy interventions are likely to support the development of early literacy skills.

A literacy enriching environment is essential for developing language and reading skills in young learners and encouraging rich and purposeful dialogue (Beach, 2025). Educators who use sociodramatic play, adult-guided play, literacy games, and writing exploration supports children in learning how to read and write (Rand & Morrow, 2021). Clement et al. (2020) also highlighted the importance of exposing young children to a print-rich environment that includes books, posters, and labels.

Learning centers, such as the home living area, dramatic play, STEM area, art area and blocks along with reading corners and writing stations, are all examples of learning centers that can influence children's literacy development reinforcing the importance of how learning environments can support early literacy development. La Croix et al. (2024) illustrated that structured literacy environments promote reading, writing, print knowledge diversity and social learning opportunities. Rand and Morrow (2021) added to the discussion noting that interactive and exploratory literacy practices strengthen children's ability to decode and process written language, further contributing to early reading readiness.

ECE educators play a critical role in designing and implementing programming that provides literacy rich experiences and build vocabulary and comprehension. The educator facilitates literacy engagement by providing literacy engagement providing meaningful

interactions exposing children to conversations, modeling, scaffolding and providing feedback along with opportunities to explore technology and to enhance literacy (La Croix et al., 2024). These experiences provide a strong foundation for lifelong learning and literacy success, supporting both cognitive and language development.

Language Rich Environments.

Creating language-rich environments is essential for high-quality ECE programs (Stehle Wallace et al., 2022). ECE educators, under the guidance of directors, establish settings to support child development, meaningful language development, vocabulary, and comprehension along with exposure to conversational interactions, which are fundamental elements of child development and language acquisition (Grifenhagen & Dickinson, 2023). Educators engage children in instructional interactions within small group discussions, which demonstrated large influence on oral language development, opportunities for peer to peer language modeling, and sets them up for academic success (Finders et al., 2023). Research has shown that the first 5 years of a child's life are critical for language exposure, since early interactions significantly influence future reading skills (Walker et al., 2020).

High-quality interactions between educators and children, supported by exposure to language that supports rich conversation and scaffolded are critical. These programs give educators the tools to help kids have language-rich conversations, making sure that they are always exposed to a variety of language experiences (Walker et al., 2020). Recent language and literacy assessments show that ECE is foundational to the development of language comprehension while enhancing social emotional outcomes

(Finders et al., 2023). These environments, characterized by responsive teacher-child interactions, storytelling, and embedded language routines, promote expressive and receptive language growth. Farrow et al. (2024) found that real-time language input from teachers was positively associated with children's social engagement and peer interactions, particularly for children with lower language output. Similarly, Finders et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of integrating language environment assessments into early learning settings to assess quality, best practices, and evaluate programs and interventions. Moedt and Holmes (2020) demonstrated that introducing purposeful play, play-based learning, shared reading, reading comprehension, language skills and intentional language scaffolding enhanced vocabulary acquisition reading comprehension, writing, acquired reading, math, social skills and narrative skills. Collectively, these findings affirm that prioritizing language-rich environments in ECE programs has positive results in helping children acquire essential skills through their own interests and curiosity such as shared book reading, the ability to express themselves emotionally and socially, supporting children's communication skills and is important to academic success.

Academic Readiness

According to Luther (2011), a seminal source, academic readiness is about whether "a child is ready to learn, able to handle various demands of a structured learning environment." (p.10). It is an assessment of if a preschool child is prepared to engage in the learning environment indicating they possess the skills such as language competence, able to verbally communicate their needs, use expressive language and have developed

social emotional skills which are the essential knowledge and skills needed to thrive. It is the foundation for a child's educational journey, encompassing their overall preparedness to engage in a structured learning environment effectively. The key points of academic readiness are ready to learn. Similarly, Bendini and Devercelli (2022) stated that ECE educators must support this development by making sure they are nurturing high-quality child development learning experiences leading to children being ready to succeed in school and life.

Academic readiness also referred to as school readiness, as defined by Ghandour et al. (2021) the degree to which the children are supported, protected and prompted over time across multiple environments and encompasses the development of self-regulation, motor, cognitive, language, social-emotional, physical health, skills These are essential for smooth transitions from ECE to the early primary years and form the foundation for economic success health benefits and a reduction in socioeconomic and racial ethnic disparities; helping children enter into kindergarten successfully. These early advantages to school readiness literacy, and numeracy, are linked to positive academic outcomes (Ricciardi et al., 2021). Language, emergent literacy; including vocabulary, numeracy, social emotional skills, and self-regulation, sentence structure, and the ability to follow instructions are key indicators for school of later reading outcomes especially for children experiencing poverty. Early literacy and math were both noted to be what determined early school achievement and later academic success. In fact, math specifically was considered a strong predictor for school readiness and later reading outcomes. (Whittaker et al., 2024).

ECE professionals contribute to students' academic readiness by laying a strong foundation for academic success. By embracing play-based learning, encouraging hands on learning, imaginative play, collaboration among young learners, rich open-ended experiences, igniting life-long learning and laying a strong foundation for academic success. Additionally, by using best practices, integrating technology, focusing on inclusive practices, emerging policies and transformative approaches, professionals are inspiring excellence in the field of ECE (Portobello Institute, 2024). Furthermore, implementing instructional practices and curriculum that support fair early learning and education for all children, ensuring holistic development and learning. These opportunities contribute to long-term academic success, highlighting the influence of high-quality ECE on children's academic and social outcomes (Bendini & Devercelli, 2022).

Long-Term Academic Success

Long-term academic success is influenced by ECE. Research demonstrates both the advantages and complexities of ECE programs, with outcomes varying based on instructional quality and sustained support. The findings of the study conducted by Horn et al, (2022) highlighted that classroom quality was found to be responsible for academic gains, however it was not for elementary classrooms. The study findings, however, supported previous literature findings showing that ECE programs influence extended through third grade, in academic skills and have the largest and longest influence on academic success; underscoring that high quality ECE attendance prompted early academic gains that continued through third grade. Temple et al. (2022) further supported

the idea that consistent, skilled instruction beginning in early childhood and continuing through the early elementary years is essential for promoting long-term academic success. They noted that ECE learning environments support improved achievement and sustained growth and suggested that effective learning experiences in preschool close achievement gaps. Additionally, they reinforced that though other researchers have been skeptical and believe there is a “fade out” after third grade, the data from their study confirms that this is not an accurate belief and that ECE in fact does have long-term influence on systematic approaches to social emotional learning, and academic competency that are important to success in school and life.

Research does not universally confirm the long-term benefits of ECE programs. The findings of Whitaker et al. (2022) contrasted with those of Watts et al. (2020), who examined the Chicago School Readiness Project and determined that while ECE interventions influenced school selection patterns, their direct influence on sustained academic performance was unclear. Similarly, Johnson et al. (2023) explored new evidence on sustained benefits of preschool attendance and the short-term benefits of ECE and found that many advantages diminished in kindergarten which is referred to as “the fade out” suggesting that the preschool advantage reduces over time. They also stated that they believe that prior evaluation missed some of the benefits of ECE. It is noted that ECE preschool attendance has immediate positive influence on early language, literacy, and math skills all which are important to academic development. Johnson et al (2023) concluded that more evaluation measures would provide clearer results.

Given these findings, it is also important to focus on high-quality ECE programs. Horm et al., (2022) recommended providing extended programming for children in preschool through third grade. Trained professionals remain critical in shaping children's educational path along with the presence of supportive, productive strategies, social emotional development, systems of support (whole child) promote children's well-being, development and learning leading to positive pathways to adulthood. Investing in well-designed ECE programs may help mitigate learning disparities that support children's learning, for which curriculum and instruction is needed to support children and enhance student success throughout their academic journey (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Defining Qualities in ECE Programs

Many qualities contribute to the success of an ECE program and support whole child development. The development of positive relationships, collaboration, a developmentally appropriate curriculum that promotes learning, educators must provide frequent research based effective classroom opportunities that are nurturing and develop children's social skills, language growth, qualified personnel, a language-rich environment, developmentally appropriate practices, hands on learning, discovery focused, purposeful play and a safe physical space all lead to a successful ECE program (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022). Due to the importance of the academic future of the students who attend ECE programs, determining what makes a successful program is important to ensure that ECE is effective in helping students (Clayback et al., 2024).

Positive Relationships with Stakeholders

Positive relationships with stakeholders are crucial in ECE programs. Considering the influence ECE directors have on stakeholders, it is essential to the success of ECE programs. Stakeholders and ECE directors foster collaboration and support for children's development and learning (Halpern et al., 2021). To further the importance of collaboration between stakeholders and ECE directors, Halpern et al. highlighted that collaboration between stakeholders and ECE directors supports vision-driven leadership, inclusive leadership, practice-focused leadership, freedom and ownership vs. close supervision, and advocacy for ECE. For example, when considering policies and practices, stakeholders and ECE directors play a critical role in the vision of the ECE center, which emphasizes developing mentally appropriate practices, learning through play, scientific inquiry, whole child development, experiential learning, inclusivity, and quality education. Stakeholders contribute by making sure that schools are ready for children, providing high-quality programming, sense making, conceptions are congruent, collective decision-making, quality learning through play, leading to quality, setting overarching goals and ensuring alignment with the center's mission. ECE directors translate this vision into actionable strategies within the center, which all relate to quality assessment (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022; Parker et al., 2022).

Inclusive leadership focuses on team diversity, creating inclusiveness in the environment, supportive leadership and involves leaders embracing inclusivity (van Knippenberg & van Ginkel, 2021). ECE directors foster an environment where inclusive practices are foundational to high-quality programs where diverse children and families

are welcomed and valued. These practices support educators in leading social just practices (Gibbs, 2020). Inclusive leadership extends beyond the classroom. It includes cultural and linguistic diversity, family engagement, and community partnerships, all in the context of ECE programs (NAEYC, 2020d).

Practice-focused leadership involves ECE directors and their influence on interpersonal, practice-focused skills and classroom practices. Their leadership style influences how teachers engage with children and parents to focus on supporting others in the learning environment. ECE leadership emphasizes learning by the education team, collaborative, teamwork culture, training, discussion and professional development. The directors also model effective pedagogical approaches by implementing practices that facilitate children's growth (Halpern et al., 2021). Balancing autonomy and supervision are key to freedom and ownership. ECE directors provide teachers with empowerment, communicate well, provide clear directions, provide resources, provide tools for learning in the classroom, support teachers as leaders in the classroom and be a good listener for staff, parents and children's needs guidance and avoid diminishing creativity.

Stakeholders support balance by trusting the ECE director's expertise while allowing room for innovation, rather than maintaining close supervision resulting in best practices for children (Halpern et al., 2021). Stakeholders and ECE directors must advocate for quality early care and education optimal learning the classroom, advocate for best practices in the classroom, interdependence and interaction between stakeholders as having positive influence on leadership through shared and extended boundaries of ECE leadership with a focus on inclusive leadership.

Advocacy involves engagement in policy change, resource acquisition, and professional development opportunities that enhance children's learning experiences. Without sustained support, the ECE field will struggle to meet demands for change ECE directors support educators through advocacy in addition to managing the program, building stable and inspiring workplace culture as part of inclusive leadership with a practice-based focus that supports the quality experience of children that depends on teachers' ability to provide stimulating supportive learning which requires effective leadership. It is also supportive to encourage teachers, parents and children to be leaders. This is where teachers, parents and children can improve other lives. (Bosire et al., 2023).

The role of an ECE director is central to developing quality practices and cultivating positive relationships within the program. According to Douglass and Kirby (2022), leadership is not just the ECE director. Teachers like the director have an influence on promoting change. The director is responsible for developing a culture that promotes improvement, and it is essential to include teaching staff in this initiative. Continuous education, training, and experience are needed to improve leadership competencies and develop styles that are trauma-informed and that focus on awareness and knowledge of what it is to be a leader in ECE. The work extends to staff and parents when leaders are provided with the skills to foster positive relationships with staff, children, and families. As important to training and support it is necessary to evaluate the results as it can increase the understanding of the leadership framework and provide recommendations that are evidence-based to evaluate the leadership in the center. When positive relationships exist among all stakeholders, an environment of mutual respect,

collaboration, and trust is created. Good stakeholders build relationships that set the stage for fostering the reliability of an organization along with flexibility leading to resilience. This is accomplished by building trust, positive relationships with employees, customers, vendors and the community. Stakeholders encourage sharing of vision, values, and information which fosters interdependence between programs and the stakeholders. (Liu & Yin, 2020). These positive relationships play a significant role in assisting children's development and learning by enhancing academics and developing a sense of belonging and well-being. The development of leaders to implement the newly obtained training and development that fosters this development or relationships and changes to the environment also prepare leaders to attract future leaders within their program and they are better equipped to support high-quality programs (Kirby et al., 2021). McLean et al. (2023) highlighted that there are several models of training that can be introduced that help to support and develop leaders to enhance relationship practices within their teams and within the implementation of program quality. When looking at the training opportunities these indicate that these relationships ensure that the needs and expectations of all parties are met, leading to better support for children's development and learning. By engaging stakeholders effectively, providing opportunities to participate in networks, cohorts, and peer learning builds on social principles and enhance leaders' confidence to implement policies and practices that enhance the overall quality of the programs, contributing to long-term academic success for children. One additional support that they mentioned was providing mentors and coaches to increase the implementation of the new

skills and knowledge obtained in the development opportunities that were offered. (Kirby et al., 2021; McLean et al., 2023).

Collaboration

In ECE stakeholders support positive outcomes and improve quality for child development and learning for children to be successful. Collaboration with families and other stakeholders is crucial. (Mason et al., 2025). Effective collaborative learning among early childhood practitioners enhances their knowledge and improves children's learning outcomes (Mason et al., 2025). Collaborative partnerships for early childhood practices are an indicator of quality and necessary for positive outcomes for children as well as ECE outcomes. Collaboratively, educators and families have a common goal, the child. It is also important that program administrators observe higher qualifications to enhance educator capacity to support improvements. As outlined in Californians Quality Early Learning the director is responsible for communicating with community members and families and collaborating with school staff (CQEL, 2023).

Collaboration plays a crucial role in improving quality in the ECE program outcomes for teacher training, recruitment and retention. It is achieved through effective collaboration with stakeholders that has shared purpose and commitment (Shelton et al., 2022). Collaboration among different people in ECE programs can lead to broader access to higher-quality education. Collaborating with other professionals is essential for enhancing the quality of ECE programs and supporting optimal learning and development for young children (Shelton et al., 2022). Successful collaborations among early childhood providers, policymakers, and stakeholders are essential for building

strong early childhood systems. ECE leaders must be able to accept practitioners feedback, value faculty and be respected to be successful in the collaboration process (Orellana & Chaitanya, 2020). ECE directors foster this collaboration by distributing leadership responsibilities, empowering teachers to lead in their classrooms, collaboratively coordinate lesson planning, directors being present in the classroom, giving support and modeling practices (Fonsén, et al, 2023).

Strong relationships with families are essential for supporting high-quality ECE programs by improving children's behavior and development, meeting developmental needs, supporting children through transitions between home and school, supporting academic outcomes, development of social competencies, early language skills, early language and literacy to lower the risk of expulsion. Collaboration with families influences children's behavior and development by providing holistic support, fostering social-emotional growth, and opportunities to benefit in the areas of cognitive and academic development, learning to regulate behavior, obtaining cultural competence, and avoiding achievement gaps (Lewis et al., 2023). Some ways ECE directors can develop collaboration with families to partner and build on children's strengths, needs and to select appropriate strategies along with support with positive parenting and strengthening family and child outcomes. It is important to involve families in decision-making, conducting home visits when it comes to program policies, curriculum, and program improvements to support equitable decision making with families (Hancock & Cheatham, 2021). Similarly, Griffin et al. (2021) highlighted the benefits of supporting dual language learners and English-speaking children and families. ECE directors must use a

holistic approach, build on strengths and incorporate family-centered practices and intervention. Enhancing family involvement is vital in early learning. Educators need to recognize the unique needs of families, work to build trust and respect with families for positive outcomes. The recommendations for hosting family engagement events include providing opportunities for family education, community and school resources, family centered practices, parent workshops, family nights, and celebrations, allowing families to connect with their child's educator, learn more about the program, and be active participants in their child's education were some examples of meeting this need. Additionally, Gross et al (2020) continued the discussion on family engagement suggesting providing home learning activities, classroom-based activities, school outreach as ways to support family engagement and including the importance of open communication in collaboration with families. Avari et al. (2022) further supports this in their study findings, which revealed that this is achieved through actively engaging in two-way conversations, observing family preferences, and having an open dialogue with families, having regularly scheduled meetings, one-on-one conversations, and informal check-ins. This provides opportunities to discuss children's progress and to address concerns appropriately.

Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

A developmentally appropriate curriculum is designed to support young children's learning and growth by aligning educational practices with their developmental stages and individual needs (NAEYC, 2020d). According to the NAEYC (2020b), where children acquire knowledge, skills, abilities and understanding and learning across

domains of social emotional, linguistic and cognitive responsive practices. It includes learning experiences that reflect what is known about young children in general and each child individually, ensuring the curriculum is both developmentally and educationally meaningful. Additionally, a comprehensive curriculum that practices cultural and linguistic practices to meet the needs of children and to actively engage families. A developmentally appropriate curriculum can mitigate the effects of cultural or individual biases and foster a positive “mirrors” and “windows” within the learning environment while fostering a curriculum which allows children to connect themselves, families, culture and community to children’s identity (NAEYC, 2020b). The curriculum influences how children perceive themselves and their communities, as reflected in it, while also introducing them to diverse perceptions and experiences. The NAEYC personnel promote high-quality early learning for all young children. NAEYC explained the concept of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and the importance of a developmentally appropriate curriculum in ECE programs. This curriculum is based on the developmental needs of young children and the influence on engagement and the achievement of meaningful goals (Brillante et al., 2023). Understanding children’s developmental stages, how they relate to developmentally appropriate practices, identifying goals and informing using this knowledge to design and implement curriculum is crucial for achieving high-quality programming. NAEYC stresses the importance of providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum as a key indicator of high-quality programs. The design and implementation of such a curriculum significantly influences the quality of ECE programs (Pyle et al., 2024).

Qualified Personnel

The skills and knowledge of ECE professionals are vital for teaching young children effectively. In Colorado, ECE professionals need to meet state and NAEYC standards to ensure they have the right qualifications to support children's growth and learning (NAEYC, 2020c). The Early Childhood Professional Credential (ECPC) helps document and measure their professional development and achievements (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2023).

Having the right adult-child ratios and group sizes is key to quality in ECE programs. Research shows that smaller ratios and group sizes are associated with positive outcomes. Though few studies exist that explore changes related to ratios, three studies that were conducted revealed that low ratios benefit quality programming but did not explore the influence it had on long-term effects. The research did however highlight that low ratios evoke positive interactions and less aggressive behavior led to better interactions between adults and children, less controlling behavior from adults, and more positive behavior from children (Dalgaard et al., 2022). Strong administrators in ECE settings influence the quality of programming and were important for maintaining high-quality programs, as directors need to be more effective when making decisions about programming, ratio size and staffing (McLean et al., 2023).

ECE professionals play a vital role in influencing children's early learning and development, preparing them for academic success (Schoch et al., 2023). In Colorado, the ECPC is important as their role is to advance policies, gather information for future funding, building awareness of offered classes, enrollment and programs. They provide

the components for professional backgrounds, coordinate training and professional learning opportunities and document professional growth and development of professionals in the state (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2023a). This professional growth includes taking specific courses, hands-on and on-the-job experiences in early childhood settings, and continuous training aligned with Colorado's Competencies for Early Childhood Educators and Administrators (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2023b).

The "Elevating Early Childhood" strategic plan, which the Early Childhood Leadership Commission in 2024, talked about the importance of trained and qualified staff, professional development, and workforce stability to provide high-quality ECE programs . Specifically relating to these talks, Colorado has created Universal Preschool Quality Standards, that have 5 key areas basic eligibility, quality teacher and workforce, instructional practices, healthy development and family and community engagement (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2024).

Safe Physical Spaces

A safe physical space in early ECE refers to an environment that is secure, nurturing, and conducive to learning and development. The ECE teacher plays a crucial role in providing a safe and supportive environment that fosters children's overall well-being and development. Robinson et al. (2025) highlighted that when children feel secure, they are more likely to engage in exploratory learning activities, which are essential for cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Robinson et al., 2025). Additionally, educators help prevent accidents and injuries by designing classrooms with

age-appropriate furniture, clear pathways, and designated learning areas, ensuring children can participate in activities without fear of harm (Read, 2023). Establishing a safe learning environment helps children succeed socially, academically, behaviorally, and emotionally. It is vital that functional relationships improve to build trust and lead to safer learning environments, which is vital for deep, meaningful learning (Robinson et al., 2025).

Responsive teaching and active parent engagement further support growth and development by supporting the parental relationship, focusing on quality and boosting quality by improving the workforce using age appropriate curriculum and ensuring the learning environment is safe and stimulating to best stop learning poverty while supporting relationships with teachers and children in quality classroom-based learning spaces and developmentally appropriate practices, educators play a fundamental role in shaping early learning experiences and fostering lifelong success.

The right learning environment goes beyond just physical space. It is about creating a place where children feel safe, understood, and free to learn actively and flexibly. In such an environment, children can interact with their teachers, peers, and surroundings in ways that help them make sense of the world. ECE spaces that influence learning allow children to move around, explore, and engage with their environment (Bendini & Devercelli, 2022).

Definition of High-Performance Systems

A high-performance system in ECE is essential for delivering high-quality education and care to young children that includes staff sharing power and decision-

making and the influence ECE directors have on change and quality improvement (Douglass et al., 2022). For ECE directors, such a system is characterized by working collaboratively, leadership of staff and center directors, a robust curriculum, and strong family and community partnerships. Maintaining a high-performance system ensures that the program meets or exceeds local, state, and national standards, thereby providing a safe and nurturing environment for children (CQEL, 2023). Additionally, it supports continuous professional development for educators, leading to more effective teaching and better outcomes for children (NAEYC, 2020c). By fostering strong relationships with families and the community, ECE directors can enhance children's learning experiences and ensure long-term success and sustainability of the ECE program (NAEYC, 2020d).

High-performing ECE programs that are defined as having a strong foundation to promote process quality, caregiver education and training, child ratio and group size and curriculum, strong foundations of policy, comprehensive supports, access to local, state and federal funding and authority, staff, professional development to build and improve programming. ECE is a system for addressing concerns of low income families, using quality rating systems to improve high-quality access to children, providing incentives and professional development (Burchinal & Farran, 2020). Children in the U. S. are not all receiving high-quality services in the programs they attend (Nyamesem et al, 2025). Liu et al, (2025) noted that high turnover, emotional stress, adverse well-being, low wage, minimal benefit to a delay in child development and school readiness. asserted that these programs face challenges with morale, meager wages, and high turnover rates, leading to disorganization and a lack of development.

The U. S. faces several challenges in providing high-quality preschool education. According to NAEYC (2024), there were substantial inequities in access to ECE services. Children from low-income families face barriers such as financial constraints and limited availability, resulting in their lower likelihood of enrolling in high-quality preschool programs. (Morrissey, 2020). Additionally, related to long-term influence these children were more likely to attend low-quality for their development and educational outcomes due to the inability to find higher quality programming due to gaps and access. High-quality care can influence children's development skills and later success in school and life (Cascio, 2021; Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020). Morrissey also highlighted that low-income families do have access to high-quality programs such as Head Start and early Head Start; however, there are more families in need than these programs can serve. Funding issues such as what families can afford and limited public investment to expand or access services also contribute to these challenges, as the U. S. spends little on early education compared to other industrialized nations (Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020; Poppe et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, research from neuroscience suggests that high-quality early education can make a critical difference in a child's future (Chaudry et al., 2021).

Effective ECE Leadership and Quality

Effective leadership in ECE is crucial for ensuring positive outcomes for children and access to high-quality programs. Research by Gibbs (2020) underlines that quality practices, a culture of trust, and program quality was met through the development of professional knowledge and language, collaboration, share of power, encouraging play

into learning environments and quality and was influenced by effective leadership. Unfortunately, leadership development is not considered to be a priority, so challenges continue to influence the quality of ECE programs. Key traits of effective leaders include fostering trust, using professional knowledge and language, promoting collaboration, allocating resources democratically, and being open to sharing power and creativity. This collaborative leadership style, which encourages idea-sharing among all staff, requires strong professional development for both ECE directors and staff (Gibbs, 2020).

A balanced approach to supervision recognizes that active support and autonomy both contribute to quality outcomes. According to the ExCELS distributed leadership framework, it includes shared power and shared decision-making to influence change and quality improvements and empower teaching staff to support improvement in classroom quality (Douglass et al., 2022). Thus, a balanced collaborative leadership combining guidance with autonomy enhances the effectiveness of the framework for ECE programs.

Effective leaders in early ECE play a critical role in establishing trust within their organizations. Trust is vital for creating a positive work environment, encouraging open communication, and promoting teamwork, all of which are essential for successful educational programs. ECE leaders achieve this by leveraging their professional knowledge and using appropriate language to provide informed guidance and support for professional development. Collaboration in ECE settings is essential. When professionals work together in interdisciplinary teams, they build a strong sense of community and shared purpose, directly benefiting children by enhancing their learning experiences and overall outcomes (Mason et al., 2025). Becoming an effective leader is not always easy;

they are often not educated or informed on the latest research. They struggle to use new or updated information and often require specialized training. According to Shore et al. (2021), who reviewed leadership professional development initiatives for ECE directors involving 100 program directors, stated that such support is extremely beneficial to stop the gap in leaders' knowledge and practice. In fact, only 3% of programs in the U.S. offer programs focusing on ECE leadership development. Collaborative environments directly influence program quality and benefit both educators and young learners. While having strong professional knowledge is important, specialized training is equally crucial for ECE directors. According to Mason et al. (2025), McLean et al. (2023), and Shore et al. (2021), directors must not only possess expertise but also need ongoing support structure to support program sustainability and to collaborate with other leaders to discuss issues around education and business in ECE and to dissolve the feeling of being isolated that directors often possess. This practical application additionally improving access to high-quality programs would lead to improving early learning to serve children with high needs, children with disabilities, and dual language learners. Intuitive and specialized training equips directors with the skills to navigate complex situations, foster positive relationships, and create high-quality learning environments for young children.

Quality Defined

The concept of "quality" as defined by Rodd (2020), refers to the level of excellence or superiority of something, often assessed against specific standards to determine its value or effectiveness. Leadership's acquisition of quality depends on their commitment, shared values and vision along with setting priorities that are effective.

Cooperation, commitment to life-long learning and truly being interested in the role are just a few of the indicators that highlight the ECE leader. It is imperative that those entering the leadership role know that it is a process and taking the role is extremely important (Rodd, 2020). McLean et al. (2023) reviewed the literature on quality in publicly funded, school-based ECE programs in the U.S. and related to the necessity to achieve developmental goals found knowledgeable directors and staff (people) having experience in ECE, a well-designed physical environment (place), and ongoing assessment the implementation of evidence-based curriculum advancing the understanding of ECE programs especially in public schools. Moreover, leadership and its capacity plays a crucial role in ensuring the hiring of qualified personnel and the implementation of more formal education of leaders and staff which is a major indicator of high quality services to meet the needs of children and families, providing basic provisions for children's health and safety, supporting child development for children while using appropriate practices ,equitable practices and fostering a community of trust and collaboration among staff and directors (Douglass et al., 2021; Gibbs, 2020; McLean et al., 2023).

Kagan (2020) suggested that quality programs are not unique to the U.S. For example, Vonsuchodoletz et al (2023) noted that they have similarities in providing development to improve services to children noting specifically the importance of context, comprehensive services and the role of administration in providing effective services for young children. Vonsuchodoletz et al examined how quality is defined in Germany, Finland, and the United Kingdom, surveying policymakers, educators,

administrators, and parents. In Germany, quality is characterized by relationships at work when making leadership decisions. In Finland, the collaborative partnership model between directors and deputy directors ensures high standards in ECE. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, quality is defined through the redistribution of leadership roles, emphasizing collaborative leadership and shared responsibilities to enhance the quality of ECE settings. The quality of connection between these countries is highlighted through different approaches to leadership, emphasizing relationship work, collaboration, and shared responsibilities.

ECE Directors: The Problems Faced

The quality of ECE is crucial, and directors must ensure highly effective early education programs. However, they often face several workplace challenges such as managing workplace stress, mental health needs, and burnout, dealing with high staff turnover, and meeting performance expectations. Stein et al (2024) highlighted that the mental health and well-being of early childhood educators are essential for maintaining a positive learning environment, yet these professionals frequently experience high levels of stress and burnout. It was further noted that this stress can lead to high turnover rates, complicating the management of ECE programs system and educational changes are needed to support ECE. (Stein et al., 2024). In alignment with this, McCormick et al. (2022) noted that workplace demands, recruitment and retention of qualified staff and overall quality and well-being contribute to frequent staff turnover, disrupting the overall quality of programming and of the workforce. Additionally, it has a direct influence on the outcomes of children and families. Furthermore, the pressure to meet performance

expectations with limited resources, absence of leadership support for programs, lack of skills to meet performance standards and does not allow for directors to lead teams effectively (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2023). Despite these challenges, effective leadership practices, such as distributed leadership and reflective practices, can help directors overcome these barriers and enhance the overall quality of ECE programs (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2023). Both Grantham-Caston and DiCarlo (2023) and Bratsch-Hines et al (2023) agree that leaders with training along with effective leadership practices may help to overcome challenges and enhance the overall quality of ECE programs.

Managing Stress and Burnout.

Managing stress and burnout is a significant barrier for ECE directors. The demanding nature of ECE often leads to high levels of stress among ECE staff, which often results in burnout and thoughts of quitting. Similarly, Kelton and Tennis (2025) highlight that ECE directors have higher levels of depression than any other profession. They link this to adverse well-being and workplace stressors that ECE directors experience. Leaders and educators experiencing a state of stress, burnout, and depression are less likely to provide emotional support, exhibit pro-social behavior or engage with children. Additionally, the leaders are crucial to the program as they directly influence teachers job satisfaction and their decisions to stay in the teacher role. This stress is exacerbated by long hours, low pay, and limited benefits, which are common in the ECE field (Kelton & Tennis, 2025). According to Stein et al. (2024), burnout is defined as a psychosocial phenomenon that reflects various societal crises and disorientation. The

researchers examined educational factors that most accurately predicted burnout and identified possible support to prevent it. Their study reveals that a decline in social status, low wages, a lack of benefits, and societal criticism are all predictors of burnout. Additionally, due to the numerous functions that administrators are tasked with staff satisfaction, supervising staff, program financials and developing shared vision, while lacking adequate preparation to be successful, they are unable to set the emphasis of the program climate on the overall organizational climate (Kelton & Talan, 2023). Moreover, Brophy-Herb et al. (2022) concurred by adding that levels of depression and stress compared research findings that ECE personnel have higher levels than others becoming extremely elevated, influencing well-being. Similarly, high levels of stress and feeling, in addition to feeling that no one could understand their challenges could lead to absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, and high turnover rates (Kelton & Tennis, 2025).

Kelton and Talan (2023) noted that though new ECE directors possess formal training and education in ECE, and education, they lack leadership and programming training and administration training making it more difficult to be effective, which led to further stress in the role. Professional developments were varied based on their previous experience. New directors need leadership essential skills. To address these issues, ECE directors need to provide systemic support and professional development opportunities and foster workplace culture along with developing support systems by networking and collaborating with others in the field while also helping educators they support and obtaining similar opportunities while limiting the amount of stress and turnover. This will help both administrators and educators manage stress, maintain their well-being, and take

care of themselves (Kelton & Tenis, 2025). hold a significant position within their programs and communities, ECE directors are often alone with a lot of responsibilities that require a wide range of skills with a small amount of supervisor support with expected high demands, extensive workloads leading to high stress, burnout and trauma facing multiple stressors that influence leadership and program quality. Ford et al. (2024) identified key challenges such as high workloads, administrative demands, and limited professional development opportunities, which contribute to increased stress and burnout. Similarly, Jennings et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of social and emotional competence and well-being for ECE professionals, noting that increased stress levels threaten program quality and child outcomes. These findings highlighted that access to quality professional knowledge, preparation and experience, reflective supervision and workplace equity promoted less stress, depression and emotional exhaustion for ECE professionals and promoted social and emotional competence. One key to social emotional competence factor that lowered feelings of emotional exhaustion was due to having good relationships with their coworkers (Schaack, 2020). Directors need opportunities for institutional support, mentorship, and leadership development programs to mitigate stress and enhance decision-making.

A recent study in the U.S. of four early childhood center directors highlighted that the work-related stress of compassion fatigue, the role of the job and learning, representing both staff and families, with little peer support, made them feel emotionally exhausted overwhelmed and alone (Bosire et al., 2023). The responsibility to provide quality programming, uplift staff by ensuring them that they were valued and appreciated,

the demands of running a center while maintaining standards and parent expectations all contribute to stress and emotional exhaustion (Brophy-Herb et al 2022). Balancing administrative duties with leadership responsibilities further adds to the stress, as directors must constantly switch between these roles (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2023). Bosire et al. (2023) reported that the frequent cognitive shifting exacerbated emotional exhaustion among directors. Additionally, their findings illustrate how not having the knowledge regarding policies, procedures and role expectations imposed time constraints while acquiring the knowledge, what education they did obtain but does not support them in their role leading to additional stress.

Job demands and goal achievement are significant stressors for ECE directors due to their multifaceted responsibilities. (Ford et al., 2025). This involves balancing administrative duties with the need to support and develop their staff including setting the tone for the programs employees by forming relationships, getting to know the staff; a key to the quality of a leader, meeting school goals, motivating staff, children, parents and the community while maintaining high standards of care and education (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2023).

Leading others and managing change can lead to the development of stress. Bosire et al. (2023) identified the main source of directors' stress were, concern for educators, children and families, addressing staff and parent concerns, supporting and serving an advocate, teacher, consultant, counselor organizer and managing change with little to no support is stressful for ECE directors due to several factors. Firstly, directors are responsible for guiding their staff through various changes, such as policy updates,

curriculum adjustments, and new educational standards. This requires strong leadership skills and the ability to effectively communicate and implement these changes. Without adequate support, directors may struggle to provide the necessary guidance and resources for their staff, leading to increased stress and potential resistance to change (Warner-Richter et al., 2020). Additionally, the lack of support can exacerbate feelings of isolation and being overwhelmed. Because there is low support, educators have fewer opportunities to share their challenges, get assistance, and gain reassurance from peers who understand their unique struggles (Brophy-Herb et al, 2022). In addition, managing change means balancing a lot of different roles and responsibilities, such as clerical tasks, staff and family motivation, and maintaining programming to reach program goals. This dual role can be overwhelming, especially when directors do not have the necessary support to delegate tasks and share the workload (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2023).

Leadership training before assuming a director's position can help in managing stress and improving decision-making. ECE directors must receive ongoing leadership training throughout their tenure, as stressors evolve. Ford et al. (2024) examined the working conditions and well-being of early childhood leaders, emphasizing that reducing demands such as workload, increasing job resources providing coaching and feedback for professional growth, clear communication, psychological support and encouragement may enhance resilience and leadership effectiveness. Their findings highlighted the importance of structured leadership programs in mitigating stress and supporting long-term success.

The importance of social support in managing professional stress is well documented. And needed to avoid burnout for many ECE directors, that support often comes from their staff, which can lead to burnout. Additionally, younger staff experience higher burnout due to less experience, poor organization, and challenging behavior from children, (Powers et al, 2025). Douglass et al. (2021) emphasized that early childhood leaders are often expected to carry these burdens without adequate workplace support, access to collaboration while managing challenges, turnover and quality improvement efforts. Specific conditions in childcare were identified which were job stress, the work environment, burnout and depression. These have a negative influence on staff, the children and families because of lower quality environments. Additionally, a lack of leadership capacity, and limited opportunities to collaborate develop into lower quality environments for children. These circumstances make it challenging for ECE directors to work towards quality improvement initiatives.

Staff Turnover and Attrition

Addressing the stress-induced challenges faced by ECE directors while understanding the dynamics of what leads to teacher attrition can support with ensuring the retention of qualified educators. Food insecurity, medical care and lack of professional support have a negative impact on children and contribute to added stress for ECE leaders and the program environment High turnover rates in ECE turnover occurs due to the circumstances of low wages, lack of career advancement opportunities, and the demanding nature of the job especially in HeadStart (Bellows et al., 2022; Schaack et al, 2022). Leaders must recognize the effect of these factors on staff morale and

programming stability. Understanding the reasons behind teacher attrition can help in developing targeted strategies to improve retention.

Directors often experience professional isolation and lack adequate support, which can exacerbate stress and burnout. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these challenges intensified as directors navigated staffing shortages, reduced parent engagement, and uncertainty about program sustainability, often without the support systems needed to manage such pressures (Hoffman & Poll, 2022). Leaders need to create robust support systems that include reflective consultation and practices, mindfulness practices, mentorship programs, and access to mental health resources. These practices can help directors decrease stress, support emotional regulation, elicit positive responses, provide nurturing care for children, and manage their responsibilities more effectively (Jennings et al., 2020).

Many factors contribute to staff turnover, some favorable and some not favorable. Contributing factors that were favorable for retention of employees were professional development workforce culture, committed staff, use of data-informed decision making and distributed leadership practices, were all found to be of factors that determined whether educators stayed or left. Educators valued opportunities for advancement, advanced degree attainment, professional growth than individuals who left. In addition to the positive response to these opportunities, the opposite was found to be true for individuals who chose to leave. They saw professional development as “undermining their sense of competence as a teacher” (Schaack et al, 2022). .Providing opportunities for skill enhancement and career growth can increase job satisfaction and reduce

turnover, ultimately contributing to a more stable and effective educational environment. In addition, leaders should invest in training programs, workshops, and other professional development initiatives that align with educators' career goals, ensuring long-term engagement and commitment to the field (Kelton & Tennis, 2025).

Halpern et al (2021) emphasized that understanding the relationship of how leadership practices influence staff turnover and retention is crucial in the context of ECE, because effective leadership directly influences workforce stability and program sustainability. Instilling leadership attitudes, providing mentoring and coaching, focusing on learning process, a teamwork culture, and support by providing collaboration and professional development led to less staff turnover and increased job satisfaction. They noted that when directors exhibit strong leadership skills, they create a positive work environment that encourages educators to stay. Additionally, reflective practices, such as self-awareness and ongoing learning, enable directors to adapt and improve their leadership strategies, positively influencing staff morale and commitment. They concluded that to alter the status of high turnover and attrition, leaders need to advocate for the ECE to be viewed as a profession, provide shared leadership, enhance collaboration with stakeholders, and approach leadership practices that are transformational, as educators have indicated they prefer leaders that approach leadership from a transformational or distributed leadership style.

In comparison with Halpern et al (2021), Kirby et al (2023) noted that leadership practices, balancing administrative duties with leadership responsibilities, using data for decision-making, and managing stress, influence turnover and staff retention. They

further shared that distributed forms of leadership, strong instructional practices, healthy partnership with stakeholders, sustained operations, positive work environments, and evidence of effective management can lead to lowering staff turnover, open pathways for staff, program quality, children and families' positive outcomes. Data-informed decision-making is critical for effective leadership. Leaders who analyze program data, such as child outcomes, teacher performance, and family satisfaction, can make informed choices. When using data effectively, directors can address challenges and create a stable workforce (Douglass & Kirby, 2022).

Retaining a qualified and committed workforce in ECE requires intentional leadership practices that foster a supportive and respectful work environment. Kwon et al. (2020) found that educators are more likely to stay in their roles when they feel genuinely valued by leadership. Recognition, trust, and a sense of belonging were key factors in creating a culture where staff felt appreciated and motivated to continue their work.

Creating a workplace culture that values educators strengthens staff morale, promotes loyalty, and mitigates turnover, a persistent challenge in ECE settings. When administrators lead with empathy and build meaningful relationships with their team, it helps foster an environment where educators want to stay. This kind of leadership supports not only retention but also “the stability and quality” of early childhood programs (Markowitz et al., 2024, p.290). Kelton and Talan (2023) further highlighted that administrators configure the organizational climate, directly influencing staff satisfaction and retention. While Doromal and Markowitz (2023) noted that the teacher's perceptions of the leader's determined if they stayed or left the center. Staff desired

support from their leaders which could be on the job, support in the moment, mentoring support, advice related to job performance, coaching, program expectations and closer relationships were significant in whether they had the intent to leave and actual turnover rates. Bryant et al. (2023) reinforced these findings by noting that there is a need for more focus on the skills of directors, staff's mental and physical health, and opportunities for mentoring, self-care resources, support with addressing children with challenging behaviors and professional development. They noted this to be important, especially with infants and toddlers due to the negative effects on the children when there is significant staff turnover. Due to the sensitive periods for infants and toddlers as they develop relationships and build their attachment and security with their caregivers.

Leadership effectiveness is reliant on leaders sharing leadership responsibilities and creating shared vision of agreed upon priorities to programming; directly influences teachers' experiences, teaching practices, and their decisions to stay in their roles. Kelton and Talan (2023) found that strong leadership fosters collaboration, communication, and opportunities for professional growth, all of which contribute to retention. These approaches reduce turnover while strengthening program sustainability and overall quality. Investing in staff retention efforts ensures a more stable, engaged, and highly skilled early childhood workforce.

Furthermore, other influencing factors, such as competitive wages, professional development opportunities, and positive workplace culture, as highlighted by the National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER), also play vital roles in retaining ECE staff (Slicker et al., 2023). For instance, centers that offer higher wages tend to have

lower turnover rates, as financial stability is a significant concern for many educators.

Caven et al. (2021) found that ECE centers with higher compensation levels experienced significantly lower staff turnover, particularly in programs serving children from birth to age five. Their findings underscore how wage disparities contribute to workforce instability, especially in private-pay centers where educators from historically marginalized backgrounds often experience low pay and higher rates of attrition.

Additionally, providing continuous professional growth opportunities helps staff feel valued and invested in their careers, further enhancing retention (Slicker et al., 2023).

The National Institute of Early Education Research (NIEER) highlighted that a skilled approach that includes appreciation, fair compensation, and professional development is essential for retaining high-quality early childhood educators.

Meeting Performance Expectations as an ECE Director.

Ensuring the sustainability of ECE programs requires directors to balance the expectations of funding agencies and parents. Federal funding has long been tied to strict accountability measures, beginning with the War on Poverty and continuing through modern programs. One example is the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which mandates detailed reporting for financial support. While these regulations help ensure program quality, they also impose administrative burdens on directors (Zaslow et al., 2024). Beyond financial oversight, ECE leaders must also address parent and family needs and expectations for high-quality care, skilled educators which requires providing in-service training and informal learning opportunities, and safe learning environments. Studies highlighted that parent and family engagement significantly influences program

success. Building a high-quality workforce that allows all staff to engage in collaboration supports the staff's willingness to participate in training. Additional factors to building a high-quality workforce include skills development, good working conditions, well-being at work and the avoidance of stressors such as imbalances in job demands, lack of resources and low wages. High-quality care is critical in ECE, and the initial preparation and program success depends on a high-quality workforce (OECD, 2020). Part of achieving high-quality within programs and meeting performance standards is partnering with families for both support and student outcomes. This is especially true with diverse communities. Leaders and staff must be able to provide culturally relevant family engagement and services however many administrators and staff are missing adequate training in cultural diversity and family engagement practices (Kea et al., 2025). Kelton and Talan (2023) suggested that directors who invest in comprehensive leadership training, workplace well-being initiatives, mentorship, peer networking, and clear pathways to career advancement were less likely to experience extreme levels of stress, have negative thoughts about the work and their role and leave the job; better preparing them navigate the competing pressures.

As funding structures and family needs evolve, directors must continue to advocate for an increased awareness of the importance of the profession,. It is also important for a focus on supporting higher wages, equitable benefits, collaboration with stakeholders, as well as build on creating a positive work environment, and the delivery of professional development, mentoring and coaching to the education staff . It is also essential to consider the importance of increasing the alignment of their programs with

both regulatory mandates and developmental priorities. (Halpern et al., 2021). By embracing a leadership framework that values financial oversight and relational engagement, ECE directors can sustain high-quality learning environments.

The daily stress for ECE directors can be significant due to the high expectations from both regulatory bodies and parents. Managing these responsibilities effectively requires intentional stress management strategies that promote leadership stability and program success. Schaack et al. (2022) examined the significance of quality provided by leadership and elevated stress on turnover intentions in ECE settings. Their study found that directors who were provided voluntary opportunities for advancement, degree attainment and professional growth improved retention rates.

Leadership in ECE extends beyond administrative duties; it requires balancing professional demands with emotional well-being. Leaders require access to cooperation, reflective supervision and a sense of community to combat occupational exhaustion and lower stress and burnout leading to less turnover (Schaack et al., 2020). NAEYC (2020d) emphasized the importance of self-care, advocating for mindful emotional management strategies to mitigate stress among ECE leaders. Research underscores the importance of fostering a supportive leadership environment to help directors manage stress effectively and create stable learning environments for educators and children alike.

Additionally, Doromal and Markowitz (2023) found that focusing on the development of standards and core competencies, clarifying the definition of leadership, designing and implementing standard training experiences and credentials to demonstrate competencies, and providing training specific to the types of supports to provide to

teaching teams for them to feel supported can lead to lower turnover and healthy working environments while strengthening ECE leadership. Their research highlighted that directors who participate in mentorship programs and peer collaboration initiatives are better equipped to navigate workplace challenges and sustain high-quality learning environments. These findings suggest a need for a support structure that address both the professional and emotional demands of ECE leadership.

Fostering a culture of well-being within ECE settings benefits both administrators and educators. Providing psychoeducational resources to educate staff to understand stress, trauma and emotional regulation is one way that leaders can help with compassion fatigue, stress, and trauma that can lead to staff turnover and physical and mental health disparities. Charlot-Swilley et al (2025). Suggest the by integrating support and strategies into the workplace as opportunities, can “ reduce compassion fatigue, stress, and reduce burnout”(p.4) They recommended methods such as mindfulness, exercises, stress relief strategies, coping skills development and restorative practices as possible strategies, ECE leaders can attempt to sustain their effectiveness while promoting a positive organizational climate.

In summary, ECE directors play a crucial role in ensuring early childhood programs meet performance expectations from various stakeholders. By balancing regulatory requirements, funding provider expectations, and parental demands, directors can create high-quality educational environments that support the development and well-being of young children (Duer & Jenkins, 2023; Halpern et al.,2021).

Reforms and Growth in Accountability

The field of ECE has grown significantly, however quality currently is insufficient across programs. Quality improvement systems have been promoted by federal legislation but remains a voluntary decision to participate in the systems. This has led to many programs failing to follow consistent quality standards. There have been recommendations that programs implement new metrics to enhance ECE quality. Following these recommendations may provide access to integrated inclusive systems, the opportunity for all ECE programs to become high-quality, the development and support of a well-qualified workforce and to build a more systematic system for ECE management (Learning Policy Institute, 2024). This approach not only supports continuous improvement but also helps secure essential funding by demonstrating accountability and effectiveness. Bassok, et al (2021), highlighted that local, state and federal investments along with the implementation of new metrics and reforms could improve ECE.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems

Most states have adopted Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) as a tool to improve increased transparency and to motivate programs that are licensed in the state to participate in the program, add awareness and improve quality. The QRIS system is a rating system that has 5 levels to assess quality. The benchmarks areas for quality include assessment of the programs focusing on work force qualifications, professional development, family partnerships and leadership management. As part of the adoption of QRIS, Colorado initiated the Colorado Shines system. (Crawford et al, 2025

The Bipartisan Council on Policy developed a scoring metric to measure state integrations in the U.S. of QRIS system implementation and its relation to state and federal funding (Walsh et al. 2023). Additionally, they noted that Colorado has fully integrated their QRIS system statewide by passing legislation to establish the department of early childhood, use licensing health and safety standards as the QRIS framework to ensure all ECE programs follow the same standards, and minimized the number of agencies that monitor early childhood programs. This created a seamless approach of continuous quality improvement. Colorado was ranked 13th on the metric.

By embracing these new metrics, staying informed about best practices, and advocating for child-centered accountability, directors and their programs provide program-level standards, promote developmentally appropriate practices and settings, along with the addition of health and safety standards. Furthermore, Walsh et al. (2023) stated that in Colorado, they have mandated that all ECE providers who possess a state license to operate a childcare facility are required to participate in the QRIS (Colorado Shines) system to be eligible for state and federal funding. Furthermore, participation in the QRIS system, combined with a data system, supports accountability measures for parents, stakeholders, and government entities, along with providing incentives for programs to continue with quality improvements, allowing ECE directors to contribute to the continuous improvement of ECE programs (Lee et al, 2022).

These reforms push programs to meet higher standards, encouraging directors to evaluate and refine their leadership and instructional practices regularly. By meeting these evolving expectations, ECE directors across Colorado can ensure their programs are

effective, sustainable, and responsive to the unique needs of local children, families, and communities (Markowitz et al., 2020). The integration of new metrics and accountability measures in ECE not only enhances program quality but also requires ECE directors to be responsible for this accountability, bridging the gap between policy mandates and practical implementation.

Standardized Tests and Assessments

Standardized assessments and performance indicators are essential for enhancing accountability and transparency in ECE. Stakeholders use these tools to evaluate program outcomes more effectively, identify areas for improvement, and make data-driven decisions. ECE directors can use this data-driven approach to ensure that ECE programs meet children's developmental needs and drive continuous improvements in the field (Irwin et al., 2022).

In Colorado, ECE programs use standardized assessments to track children's development and guide instructional strategies. The Assessment, Evaluation, and Programming System Third Edition (AEPS-3) a tool used to evaluate early childhood developmental milestones (Grisham et al., 2021). TS GOLD is a framework for assessing growth across multiple domains, ensuring alignment with early learning standards (Lambert, 2020). Similarly, the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) uses an approach that is extensive to gather information on children's developmental progress. The information gathered could be used for making decisions. (Kriener-Althen et al., 2020; Sussman et al., 2022). The assessment tool can provide educators and ECE directors data which can influence "positive learning improvements in instructional

implementation and to achieve quality outcomes” (Cameron et al., 2023; Kriener-Althen et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020, p. 50).

AEPS-3 is a “comprehensive, curriculum-based assessment tool designed to evaluate the developmental progress of children from birth to six years old. It consists of 4 components assessment, goal, progress, intervention. The domains of the assessment were fine motor, gross motor, adaptive, social-emotional, social-communication, cognitive, literacy, and math” (p.151). The assessment has a family report and curriculum guides to support educators and other professionals in partnering with families. (Bricker et al., 2022; Toland et al., 2022). This tool aids in determining eligibility for early intervention and special education services, setting individualized goals, and monitoring progress over time. It also supports the development and writing of Individual Education Plans for children with disabilities. The original version was for infants and toddlers only children with disabilities but was later expanded to the current version which includes preschool and children with and without disabilities (Toland et al., 2022).

Teaching Strategies Gold (TS Gold) is “an observational assessment system designed to measure the development and learning of children from birth through third grade. The assessment consists of 10 domains and 38 objectives, including social-emotional, cognitive, English language acquisition language, cognitive, literacy, mathematics, science and technology, social studies, and the arts” (Teaching Strategies Gold, 2023, Resources, “The Objectives for Development and Learning section). The assessment tool aligns with state ECE guidelines, guides teachers in the development of

individual and group lessons and strengthens family partnerships (Teaching Strategies Gold, 2023, “Meeting Our Leading Early Learning Platform”, section).

Similarly, DRDP is “an observational assessment tool used to evaluate the development of children from early infancy to third grade. The assessment has 8 domains, approaches to learning, social emotional, language, English language development, health, physical, science and math” (Desired Results, 2025, Desired Results System, About, section). The DRDP can be used to improve the quality and assistance of ECE programs for children and families for children birth to 12 years (Desired Results, 2025).

The Ready-Set assessment is designed to evaluate school readiness among four- to six-year-olds and is used for planning the transition from preschool to kindergarten. It includes 40 items from the AEPS-3 Test across eight developmental areas: fine motor, gross motor, adaptive, social-emotional, social-communication, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics. The assessment includes meaningful information for examining the developmental status of the child, tracks progress and provides a focused breakdown of the strengths and needs of a child (Bricker et al., 2022). Directors and teachers use the assessment to understand how prepared a child is to enter kindergarten and to assess where a child is academically. ECE educators can use the tool to develop goals for learning, plan activities based on individual children and use it to work with parents (Macy et al., 2022). Another use of the AEPS-3 is to support parents in determining if their children were ready for kindergarten. It identifies routines and activities that follow the developmentally appropriate practices of core standards and can be used in both

family and center based childcare programs. Similarly, Grisham et al. (2020) highlighted that the AEPS3 is currently used by Early HeadStart and Head start programs that are state funding for tracking progress and gathering data for interventions if children present with potential disabilities. Because the tool is a curriculum-based assessment, and requires training and interrater reliability, it has been the most accurate assessment used. The findings from their study revealed that participants from the study communicated that the tool was useful for program planning monitoring progress. The participants also stated that it was a great tool for developing functional goals. In conclusion the findings they highlighted were that the social emotional domain paralleled with the communication domain.

In comparison, the use of the AEPS-3 for the collection of performance-based data provides useful, relevant, and meaningful information that teachers and other professionals can use to examine developmental status, create a developmental profile, design an intervention that includes goals and objectives, and track progress at the onset of the intervention (Bagnato et al., 2024; Bricker et al., 2022).

The Ready-Set Family Assessment of Child Skills (FACS) is a companion measure to the Ready-Set, which is completed by parents. This tool is used to collect data and measure kindergarten readiness for children aged 4-6. It was created to assess children's readiness skills and to be used by ECE educators. The Family and Child Studies (FACS) assessment focuses on various aspects of family dynamics and child development. It includes career, community, and family connections; social, economic, and technological changes; career goals and family capacity; and lifelong learning and

leisure (Macy et al, 2022). Directors can use this comprehensive assessment to analyze strategies to manage multiple roles and responsibilities in family, work, and community settings.

The DRDP, TS GOLD, and the Assessment, Evaluation, Programming System Third Edition AEPS-3 for Infants and Children can be used by directors to evaluate and support accountability and reform in ECE. These assessment tools are employed in the State of Colorado, where directors use the data to ensure that ECE programs are accountable and continually improve the quality of education for children.

As part of the Results Matter program, AEPS-3 was introduced in Colorado to enhance outcomes for young children by using data to inform program instruction and development. The Results Matter program, implemented in various states including Colorado and Nebraska, aims to improve outcomes for preschool children, particularly those receiving special education services. This initiative affects the use of authentic assessment data to inform classroom instruction, program development, and policy decisions. In Colorado, Results Matter influences teachers, administrators, families, and other education partners with developmentally appropriate assessments that offer valid and meaningful information about young children. ECE directors guide teachers in the effective use of assessments and integration of technology for real-time reporting and digital portfolios by providing them with on - going professional development that is key to their learning success (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2023b). Assessments are a critical part of educator and administrator practices. Educators use assessment tools to identify goals for children's needs in development, they collect multiple data samples

to justify the goals, transfer the data into instructional practices that align with the goal, and monitor the outcomes from the implementation. The AEPS tool meets all the requirements needed for the educators to meet these standards. Administrators have the role of supporting staff but also the family when a delay has been identified. They can use information from the gathered data to engage with families, provide strategies, provide additional resources and address parent concerns (Rahn et al., 2024). ECE directors can enhance their programs' quality and accountability by ensuring that they are meeting the developmental needs of all children. The assessment tools mentioned highlighted valid data that can be used to influence instructional practices and improve program quality. The tools furnish directors with essential information to meet state accountability requirements. The assessment tool includes valid information on early childhood developmental milestones (Grisham et al., 2021; Lambert, 2020; Sussman et al., 2022).

Lack of Preparation

ECE directors have many responsibilities and managerial tasks they must complete, but there is evidence that ECE directors are underprepared for their roles. Movahedazarhouligh et al. (2021) noted in their mixed methods study that leaders in ECE “often have no prior training in leadership or management before taking directorships” (p.12). They lack academic and professional training, which influences the outcome of supporting the center, its staff, and families. Additionally, their study highlights leaders lack adequate preparation and development when they initially become leaders and are put into these unprepared positions. The importance of assessments and the need to meet

accreditation standards is a focus for policy makers and parents to determine what standards for accreditation and expectations to gather data on to make informed decisions on quality (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022; Jenkins et al., 2021; Whitaker et al., 2022). Directors have not been appropriately prepared for the responsibilities associated with managing a successful ECE program (Movahedazarhouligh et al., 2021).

The NAEYC Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, highlight the importance of comprehensive preparation and ongoing professional development for ECE directors. These standards outline the core knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to lead high-quality programs effectively. Directors are expected to demonstrate competence in curriculum development, staff supervision, and regulatory compliance, areas where many continue to report insufficient preparation (NAEYC, 2020a). This study's findings aligned with the NAEYC professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators, reinforcing concerns that limited, role-specific training can hinder a director's ability to manage program expectations and support continuous improvement in early childhood settings.

Improving the Performance of ECE Directors

ECE program directors and teachers must hold adequate knowledge, education and training as it is critical to determining the quality of programming and the academic success of children. The National Institute for Early Learning Educational Research (NIEER) published a report about the current state of ECE in the U.S. which included information on leadership in ECE. (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2022). The authors of the report concluded that there are low standards of quality that exist in US ECE programs.

Additionally, they highlighted that the National Policy environment suggests that the state policy makers increase the importance of leadership in Pre-K as it has diminished and continues to lessen as quality and standards fall back due to staff shortages and loss of funding streams. The prediction is that it will continue to diminish over time along with the education of ECE teachers with states choosing to lower the standard for education of lead teachers.

The Californians Quality Early Learning (2023) highlights the important role of the ECE director. Directors have many responsibilities to ensure that their programs provide a safe and nurturing environment. Directors develop and implement curriculum in the programs, while sustaining collective practices. They run the day- to- day operations and maintain programming based on national standards. Other duties include mentoring teachers, interviewing and hiring new staff, evaluating performance and conducting observations in classrooms.

Supporting ECE Directors

Supporting ECE directors is crucial for the success of ECE programs. Researchers have explored various methods to support these directors, including standardizing support, professional development, and mentorship programs (Douglass & Kirby, 2022; Farnham et al., 2020). Supporting ECE directors is not just about administrative tasks; it is about nurturing effective leadership and approaching problem solving using an inclusive leadership approach and collaboratively coming up with a solution.

Standardizing support for ECE directors ensures continuous learning and improvement in leadership practices. Kirby et al. (2021) examined structured leadership

frameworks noting that developing and following initiatives that are designed for leaders can reinforce leadership knowledge and skills. Their findings suggest that building structure and guidelines to development for leaders will prepare them in supporting a team and program that is high-quality. Similarly, Farnham et al., (2020) emphasized the importance of mentorship programs in fostering leadership growth, noting that peer-to-peer learning models significantly improve directors' ability to manage staff and implement best practices.

Professional development courses aimed at enhancing leadership skills have been widely studied. Lee et al. (2022) investigated leadership training initiatives designed to prepare ECE directors as change agents within their organizations. Their study found that development can influence who will decide that becoming a leader is something they want to do. The focus is on the skills, mind set and knowledge that the person brings and implements as a leader that achieves positive outcomes. Fu (2022) further explored distributed and pedagogical leadership models, highlighting how leadership influences program quality and educator development. These studies collectively reinforce the emphasis of structured development opportunities that provide ECE directors with the skills for effective leadership.

By integrating standardized support, mentorship, and professional development, ECE directors can establish a cohesive and effective leadership framework that fosters continuous improvement (Lee et al., 2022). These strategies not only strengthen program quality but also enhance educator satisfaction, reducing burnout and turnover (Fu, 2022).

As a result, young learners and their families experience more stability, enriched learning environments, and improved educational outcomes (Kirby et al., 2021).

Mentorship programs are essential in helping new ECE directors build confidence, develop leadership skills, and establish a strong support network. Rodd (2020) suggests that to support the development and learning for ECE workforce, it requires leaders who are skilled and knowledgeable to provide supervision, mentoring and coaching in support of their teams. When an ECE leader steps into the role, they then become obligated as a leader to help others use their skills, experience and knowledge to their fullest potential.

Unfortunately, as Rodd (2020) highlighted by the study, there is an absence of opportunities for preparation and training, a clear job description of ECE leadership position does not exist which often leads to difficulties for ECE leaders especially those that are in the novice stage of their career. Training, mentoring, supervision and coaching must be made a priority in the development of ECE leaders. Rodd states that the focus of research has been on teachers' perceptions of mentorship programs, with few studies exploring the viewpoints of ECE directors. It is vital to understand how directors perceive their training and support to enhance existing programs and address any support gaps. Failing to consider administrators' perceptions of the training they receive increases the risk of overlooking essential details, such as whether they feel under-supported in certain areas or if any resources are especially effective.

The Colorado department of early childhood has developed and implemented structured apprenticeship programs available to ECE professionals available through the

office of early childhood that offer hands-on training and mentorship, with the intention to support educators in their career development and enhancing program quality.

(Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2025). The educator-to-educator professional development model focuses on collaborative learning, ensuring that educators receive continuous support tailored to their evolving responsibilities NAEYC (2020).

The bank street education center in partnership with Schaeffling et al (2025) discuss the development and benefits of the early educator apprenticeship programs. The programs were tailored to support the ECE professional who may not have the avenue to get the knowledge needed for their career advancement. Helping professionals stay in the field is critical, especially with the shortage of qualified staff. The purpose is to add value to the profession, provide viable options for career advancement and to preserve the ECE workforce.

The introduction to the apprenticeship program as highlighted by the department of early childhood in Colorado, is an encouraging proposition to support ECE professionals in obtaining professional credentials or degrees in ECE education. It is an extensive apprenticeship for ECE professionals that provides guidance in obtaining higher level education. It can be modified to meet the unique needs of the ECE industry. This is a great advancement and opportunity to continue to develop and grow the ECE industry. Just like educators benefit from a sense of community, directors also do better in a workspace that has a supportive network. Connecting with other directors makes them feel less isolated and allows the opportunity to transition positively into the director's leadership journey.

Leadership development is a crucial component of ECE. ECE directors play a significant leadership role in early childhood programs. By participating in comprehensive leadership training, obtaining the needed skills for administrative leadership, leadership essentials and pedagogical social leadership compensation. This results in a reduction in workplace stress and turnover while also teaching self-efficacy. (Kelton & Tennis, 2025).

The educator-to-educator professional development model emphasizes the power of collaboration and peer learning within educational settings. Rather than relying solely on external experts or formal training programs, this approach recognizes that educators have valuable insights and expertise to share. The professional development model encourages new and critical thinking about current practices and supports the growth of strong leadership in ECE programs. Creating an ongoing professional development program that considers the individuality of the ECE directors participating in the program can equip educators with up-to-date information, empowering them to make informed decisions for their students each day (Germuth, 2021; Jennings et al., 2020).

The organizational climate and conditions of ECE programs play a pivotal role in influencing school performance (Jennings et al., 2020). Studies on leadership styles within ECE have explored ways to support professionals and improve program outcomes. Leaders that chose a servant leadership style, for example, had the potential for positive outcomes due to the nature of the holistic approach and the influence on team members. The result is enhanced job satisfaction and the potential for members of the team to achieve their individual job performance goals (Canavesi & Minelli, 2021).

Efforts such as the Power to the profession (P2P) initiative have sought to unify the field of ECE by establishing a standardized framework for educators working in diversified setting with children birth to eight. Germuth (2021) suggests that this initiative supports that effective professional development can lead to effective teaching that provides instruction to enable people to learn teaching practices and improve student learning, but professional development must be effective. It is also noted that teachers often obtain new knowledge by attending workshops, however these rarely change their practices or have a positive influence on future student achievements; there are no measures that have been discovered to say otherwise. Professional development needs to be restructured so that it changes teaching and improves learning. Additionally, new skills have been found to fail to be implemented from the attendance of workshops due to an absence of support when educators attempt to implement the newly acquired knowledge and skills. The author suggested that a restructuring of professional development could potentially provoke.

In comparison, Jennings et al (2020) noted that it is important to highlight supporting educators' social emotional competence and well-being illustrating that offering interventions equivalent to professional development programs, mindfulness-based caregiving interventions. These interventions need to be offered with a culturally responsive approach and meet the needs of the educators dependent upon their schedules and identified education needs. Other suggested supports were offering assessment driven programs, online interventions, consultation and reflective supervision. In conclusion, the researcher suggests that more funding be provided, additional more up to date research be

conducted, advocate for more funding and update policies and practices. The focus on renewal is vital to improving quality in ECE, leading to strong development of children who are in ECE programs.

One thing that ties these studies together is the desire for equity to improve outcomes for students with leaders who follow a culturally responsive approach in ECE programs. Inequitable treatment of diverse groups in schools remains a persistent concern. Through a synthesis of 63 empirical studies, Leithwood (2021) highlighted how equitable practices in education schools can support children and families by improving practices, providing culturally responsive leadership practices, implementing cultural, linguistic, and ethnic curriculum and instruction, and influencing the quality of school programs. Additionally, it was noted that, in addition to implementing a culturally responsive leadership framework and instruction, it is also necessary to focus on the need for more school resources and opportunities for students who need them to achieve the same level of success. Approaching this with a social justice and inclusion lens can foster equitable environments and boost student achievement over time.

Martin (2021) supported the idea of enhancing equitable practices specifically to address health disparities experienced by children of low-income families. He highlighted the benefits of children enrolled in high-quality programs and noted that they have the possibility of reducing the gap in child achievement that is often present for children in low-income families. Martin suggested that pediatricians partner with high quality preschool programs like HeadStart and state universal preschool programs identified as high-quality and recommended by the Academy of Pediatrics, to also reduce gaps in

child health. To combat the gaps in child health for low-income families, ECE programs support overall health and well-being by providing rich learning environments and warm-responsive interactions between the children and their caregivers. These results further affirm that equity in ECE is not just about access but also about program quality and relational trust within the classroom. Hanno et al. (2022) added to this discussion by illustrating a focus on early educators' well-being as a factor in sustaining program quality. They found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood professionals experienced financial and emotional stress, noting that well-being could directly influence the quality of ECE programs especially during the pandemic, and could reach further long-term influences after the pandemic. Their findings made the case that there is a need for continued exploration into the financial and mental well-being of ECE educators to develop a deeper understanding, using this knowledge to develop strategies to offer support. Educators play a critical role in the development of young children to prepare them for kindergarten and beyond. Their well-being is vital to ensure the ECE programs are high quality. Bryant et al. (2023) extends this argument by connecting teacher well-being, related to mental and physical health, along with access to self-care options increased classroom quality and stability. Their study found that stressful work, a negative work environment, and challenges with children's behavior were indicators for high turnover. Additionally, the remaining staff were left with the decision to invest in the effort to stay. These findings underscore the importance of focusing on educators emotional well-being and the needs for support so educators can maintain consistency which is vital to sustaining high-quality programming.

In contrast, leaders must have a culturally responsive approach to leadership, focusing on improvements that are considered equitable for students. Leithwood (2021) examined how leadership style influences program quality. Leaders need to create quality partnerships with families, the community, and teachers. Curriculum needs to be sensitive to and make use of cultural content, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic information that the children and families bring into the environment. Leaders need to assist their teachers in implementing instruction specific to the underserved population in their respective classroom and in the school. These practices support the development of being equitable to students. Unfortunately, their study did not address how to equip leaders with the self-care and administrative support needed to support well-being both individually and for educators.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. The concluding section of this literature review provides a summary of the key findings relevant to the study's purpose.

Summary and Conclusions

I synthesized literature about ECE directors and their roles, responsibilities, and professional needs within this literature review. The research was divided into five themes: the importance of ECE, defining quality in ECE programs, ECE directors, problems faced by ECE directors, and improving the role of ECE directors. These categories were reviewed in depth to gain a better perspective of where ECE began and what ECE directors need to be successful now. I reviewed common obstacles to director

success and what systems were currently in place to provide ECE directors the tools required to be successful.

Several studies have focused on the enactment of early learning standards, kindergarten early assessments, and QRIS programs. Merrill et al. (2020) examined the research behind the selection of these measures. The research illustrates that all 50 US states have adopted early learning standards and kindergarten assessment, but only 38 have adopted a QRIS system, one being the State of Colorado. It is noted that, though this was a federal investment, there is an inadequate amount of evidence-based research showing the influence on student outcomes. Based on these findings, it was recommended that state policy makers request that intensive assessments be conducted to ensure the accuracy and implications, along with quality assurance measures for evaluation of the influence that is or is not happening by using these methods the implementation.

It has previously been recognized that ECE directors influence the cultures of the ECE centers they oversee. A positive workplace culture has a strong link to staff retention and positive student outcomes. Grantham-Caston and DiCarlo (2023) indicated that childcare directors who adopt transformational leadership styles create environments with higher teacher commitment and improved program quality. When directors intentionally model supportive leadership, they not only shape organizational norms but also enhance staff morale and stability.

The current study addresses this gap by using the previously stated research questions. Transformational leadership theory was chosen as the theoretical framework

for this study as the best method to contextualize what current ECE directors' experiences are with the training and development they have in their current roles. This framework also helps reveal what support, training, and resources directors report are needed to develop ECE directors and create and lead high-quality teaching teams. Chapter three detailed the methods for identifying the needs of current ECE directors.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In this chapter, I provide the synopsis of the qualitative research design and rationale for the study, related to the experiences of current early childhood directors in Colorado. The purpose of the study was to gain a clear understanding of the training ECE directors have received and what supports and resources are needed to lead and develop high-quality teaching teams. A description of the study's methodology, the participants defined, the selection process, my role as the researcher, and the methods taken to avoid ethical discrepancies and bias are provided. Additionally, in this chapter, I provide the research questions aligned with interview questions that were used to collect data, and how data were processed to provide a concise analysis of the results while focusing on the reliability of the study's findings and recommendations for further research.

Research Design and Rationale

I used a basic qualitative design to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe their experiences with training and development for their current leadership role?

RQ2: How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming?

The central concept or phenomenon of the study was the experiences with training and development for their current leadership role, which needed support, training, and resources for the development of high-quality programming.

To address the research questions, I used a qualitative design for this study. Ravitch and Carl (2021) explained that a qualitative design is the way the researcher

wants to coherently plan and set up the study, along with a qualitative approach, which involves methodical and contextualized research procedures to illustrate the way the participants of a study view, approach and make meaning of their experience, background and the world (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The qualitative research tradition was used to gather individuals' perceptions and opinions to provide a descriptive goal of the currently unexamined phenomenon and a reflective goal to show connections between multiple variables of ideas, people, and their goals (Ravitch & Carl, 2021; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach was appropriate for the study because it collects ethnographic information and participant perceptions both individually and in groups.

Other research traditions were considered but not chosen. When considering the various research traditions, ethnography looks at a whole culture of an organization, group or society to examine features of the culture including values, norms, traditions and shared experiences that together create a pattern of the characteristics of the group, society or organization (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), rather than the focus of this study, which was more individualized knowledge and experience, along with perceived ideology. Another methodology is a case study. The case study is considered as “offering validity through the merging of findings, sources, and methods” (Farquhar et al., 2020, p. 164). ECE directors can provide during the collection process. Phenomenology, while a valuable qualitative research method, does not align with the data collection approach required for this study. DeHart (2020) described this methodology design as exploring the fundamental extent of an experience by examining the familiar essence and interrelation of participants' lived experiences. However, the focus of this study is not to

analyze inner essence but rather to capture participants' perceptions, knowledge, and educational background, making alternative qualitative methods more suitable for the research objectives.

Quantitative research is a study of the nature of experience and is appropriate for answering questions of why something is not observed, determining complex fundamental interventions, and focusing on intervention improvement (Busetto et al, 2020). Finally, the decision not to use a quantitative method for the design is that these methods do not use a reflective process nor capture the lived experiences of individuals and groups, specifically regarding their perceptions, knowledge, and skills needed, which are questions for this specific study.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher for this qualitative study, my role was as an observer. Rubin and Rubin (2012) referred to multiple goals to use when gathering empirical data for a qualitative study, which, when seeking to understand something, one should use exploratory goals. To understand and describe the phenomenon, using descriptive goals helps with unexplained phenomena. Additionally, relational goals assist with connections between multiple variables, such as people, places, and goals. I used fieldwork as the process of collecting the data in natural settings, gathering information specifically in the settings of individuals where the phenomenon occurs. This method is an ethnographic way of observing participants (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As the researcher, I remained aware of my identity and positionality in the field to ensure that my social identity and positionality in how external and internal aspects of my own experiences did not affect or

influence the collection of data. My employment at the time of the study was outside of the ECE center-based care. My past and present relationships with colleagues and connections in the community could pose a bias if not carefully considered as part of the selection process. If I worked with or supervised them previously or currently, I may introduce bias into the study. This was avoided by using the initial screening questions designed to assist with determining the qualifying criteria for participants of the study.

The study had ethical considerations that needed to be addressed regarding the researcher's role and the participants. In Colorado, I am an active member of the community, thus needing to go outside of the local area of influence to try to avoid bias. To avoid the ethical considerations, I used a purposeful sampling where participants were selected using an initial screening process with qualifying criteria specific to the study. Additionally, I made sure that I clearly separated my role as researcher and community member to avoid any conflicts of interest. I also kept notes during the coding and analysis process to make sure that I was aware of any bias I may have had through this process. Furthermore, I used informed consent and voluntary participation to make sure that the participants knew what they were agreeing to and to ensure their participation was without coercion.

Methodology

The purpose of educational qualitative research is to advance research practices, and a basic qualitative research design is applicable to obtain a thorough perception of effective educational processes (Tisdell et al., 2025). The purpose of this study was to obtain information that will provide future processes and procedures that participants

have described as needed to be effective early education directors. I chose from 20 different center-based programs for the collection of data for the study. The chosen participants all participated in a virtual platform semistructured interview. The interview questions were aligned with the RQs and framework to elicit in-depth responses, and I interviewed until saturation was reached.

Participant Selection

The sample of participants for this study were selected from among ECE directors in Colorado serving children from birth to 8 years of age. Within Colorado, there are more than 30 centers that serve the needs of the ECE population. These directors are the population from where the sample were collected because they were the informants who could best answer the research questions.

Sampling Strategy

I used a purposeful sampling frame for the study. Mweshi and Sakyi (2020) explained that purposeful sampling is designed to select participants based on their current knowledge and experience, in addition to their perceived needs for support, training, and development in their role as an ECE director. Following this sampling provided the appropriate participant selection for this study. Purposeful sampling is the appropriate sampling frame because it provides context-rich and detailed information from a specific population since ECE directors have specific knowledge and experience in the field and allows the research to obtain the needed information to answer the research questions. Additionally, purposeful sampling is recommended sampling

approach that is used in qualitative research to avoid a random probability sample which would be used in a quantitative study (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Participant Selection Criteria

Participant selection included clear criteria and a rationale to ensure inclusion by using both electronic and in-person communication with directors through thoughtful use of judgment to select participants who provided useful data needed for the study.

Each prospective participant was screened using a screening form electronically via email that included whether each was

- Considered director-qualified in Colorado by the PDIS (Colorado Shines) approved qualifications.
- Employed at a center-based program in the defined area targeted for the study.
- Willing to participate in an interview, face-to-face or via Zoom.
- Possessed some education and or training in leadership.

Anyone who did not meet all criteria was thanked and not selected to participate.

Sampling

According to Ravitch and Carl, (2021), there is no set of rules that mandate a particular sample size for qualitative research; however, it is more important to develop a sample size that will provide the information you want to know, the purpose of the research questioning provide for credibility, and align with the research strategy (Patton, 2002). Qualitative research seeks to explore and explain collected information, thus focusing on a smaller group size. Research sampling sizes are rather small, but they must be relevant enough to duplicate and be notable along with being appropriate meaning

participants need to be experienced in the phenomenon of the study (Morse, 2015). The ideal sample size was 10 to 12. A total of 13 participants were eventually inducted into the study. Data were collected to ensure saturation, which empirical reviews indicate typically occur within this range for homogenous populations and narrowly focused studies. Reaching saturation of the data is important as it indicates that the data has attained the declination and implications of the issues studied and demonstrates content validity (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Procedures for Identification and Selection

I began the identification and selection process by sending a letter of invitation email to 20 centers in Colorado. The centers were chosen by locating those listed on a Google search, which included a contact email for each center. The letter of invitation included my student email address at Walden University and was forwarded to the directors who may be interested in participating in the study. I sent an email invitation to participate in the study, including a detailed description of the study, prescheduled availability for interview dates and times with interview, and a written consent form.

I screened each potential participant as described above. Once the initial selection criteria were met by completion of the pre-screening process, a sample of seventeen volunteers were chosen for the next step. A total of 20 volunteers responded to the initial request to participate in the study; 17 met the inclusion criteria, and 13 participated in the study. The participants who were accepted received an acceptance email once I received the signed consent form.

Instrumentation

The instrument that I used for the data collection of this study was a protocol developed for one-on-one interviews. I used a researcher-created interview protocol (Appendix A) to conduct semistructured interviews. Using the interview protocol, I worked to elicit responses that provide a clear understanding of the perceptions of the director related to knowledge, experiences, and needs to be effective in the director role. I conducted follow-up questions and probing questions to obtain examples and details for the study. All responses were recorded using an audio device and an external hard drive for storage.

Interview Protocol

I developed an interview protocol to support the process of the interviews, which was shared with the institutional review board. All interview content was based on the research questions, literature review of the topic, and the purpose of the study. Following an interview protocol assisted me with quality data collection and ensured that each of the research questions were fully answered. The protocol included introductory questions, follow-up questions, probing questions, and questions of clarification as needed. To address validity, I developed the interview protocol following the methodological integrity defined by Levitt et al. (2021), which was to “follow the research design and procedures that support the research goals, respect the researcher’s approach to inquiry, and are specifically designed for crucial characteristics of the controlled matter and the participants” (p.359) which are the infrastructure of trustworthiness. Fidelity plays a significant role in the validity of a study, which is the competence to represent the

experience covered by the study which emulate the consideration of the uniqueness and array of experiences and practices in the circumstances beneath the study (Levitt et al., 2021). I gathered a group of experts from the early childhood field, which included a teacher, a director, and a higher education individual, to develop an expert panel. The qualifications for the experts included having education, training, and experience within the field of ECE, and at least one of the experts having qualitative research experience. This panel was provided with a copy of the interview protocol that included the interview questions to establish the content validity of the protocol. After the panel reviewed the protocol and the interview questions, the panel validated that the protocol and interview questions aligned with ECE practices and the purpose of the study. They recommended I analyze any assumptions I may have to ensure that fidelity is maintained. I did this by making notes of my assumptions, if any, reflecting on any possible bias, and I focused only on the protocol, interview questions and their relation to the research questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Before recruiting participants and data collection for the study, I requested approval of the study, along with the recruitment and data collection, from the institutional review board (IRB) of Walden University. The petition of request to the IRB was accepted for the study. Walden University's ethics approval number for this study is 10-15-24-1015222. I used a low-risk workplace interview frame and followed the IRB manual for this process.

Recruitment

Once approved to collect data, I sent out an email to local directors at center-based programs within Colorado for the study. I used publicly available email addresses located on the program's website. If a center did not list an email for the director, I sent a recruitment email to the public email list for the center, asking for contact information for the director. Included in the initial email, I provided a brief criterion form to the directors as part of the vetting and selection process. I included my Walden University student email as the method of contact if a person were interested in participating in the study. I also asked each participant for their preferred email address to use for contacting them before and during the study.

I recruited only participants who were early childhood directors who met all the criteria: (a) had been in their role for at least 1 year, (b) had completed some coursework or professional development training, and (c) worked in a center-based program. I emailed the prospective participants to introduce myself, ensured that they met the specific criteria in the participant selection criteria step, and obtained permission to email an invitation for participation in the study, including the appropriate consent form template supplied for use from the IRB manual for pre-approval documents for low-risk work-related interviews of professionals in the field of ECE. I sent an email to each participant that was chosen with the details of the interview. The invitation email described the specific study, what the expectations were of a participant, and a timeline of the study and its completion. I requested they respond within two weeks from receipt of the email invitation to participate and confirm they met the criteria to participate.

Participation

I sent a letter of invitation by email to the center directors, inviting them to participate in my study. The letter of invitation described the study, procedures related to the study, what the qualifying requirements were to be a participant, my contact information, permission to share the invitation with others who may be interested in participating in the study, and an attached informed consent form. I provided the informed consent form by attaching it to the letter of invitation email with explicit instructions that it must be signed and emailed back to me at my university email within 7-10 business days after receiving the letter of invitation and consent form attachment by email.

Once I received the acceptance to participate and the signed informed consent form by email, I contacted each participant by email with times and dates to schedule either an in-person meeting place or a Zoom meeting for the interview. Once interview times and dates were confirmed, I sent a follow-up email with the specific date, time, and location of the interview. I allowed each participant to contact me if there were any questions before the interview. As part of the participant selection criteria and the pre-approved IRB procedures for a low-risk, work-related interview, I only collected audio recordings from the Zoom interviews and transcribed interviews, which were saved and stored on an external hard drive that is only accessible to me.

Data Collection

All the data for this study were gathered in semistructured interviews in individual interviews via Zoom. I began the interview by welcoming the participants to the

interview and thanking them for being willing to give their time and information for the study. Once I created a calm and welcoming environment for the participant, I went through the format of the interview. I shared the purpose of the study and the duration of the interview, and I alerted the participant that the interview would be recorded using an audio-collection device. I reminded each participant that their names would not be used in any research report to ensure confidentiality. I asked each participant if they were comfortable continuing with the interview or if they had any questions or concerns that needed to be addressed. I provided each participant with a copy of the questions to provide ease and understanding of the questions. I used my developed interview protocol script to introduce the interview process (Appendix A). I asked the participants to share a bit about themselves and the role they play in their program. I then ask questions specifically related to the purpose of the study. This included questions about obtaining data collection on the participants' perception of their preparation and education related to their role as a director in ECE. I asked the interview questions that were in the interview protocol of each participant, which were relevant to the research questions of the study. I furthered the data collection process by asking open-ended questions along with the use of probing questions to obtain an in-depth collection of data for the study. I used an audio recording device to capture the data. After the interviews are completed. I thanked the participants for their participation in the interview and the study and expressed to them that I would share the results of the study with them once the study is complete.

Data Analysis Plan

Upon completion of all interviews, I downloaded the recordings of the interviews using the iTranscribe software to transcribe the audio recordings. I uploaded the file into computer-based qualitative data software, *Quirkos* (Version 2.4) [Computer Software] CERN. All information was backed up on a removable hard drive for safe backup storage. Interview codes (P1, P2, P3, and so forth) were associated with the transcript, and all information with identifying names, etc., were stored separately.

Once the data was collected and stored securely, I uploaded all interview audio files to iTranscribe for transcribing the data. iTranscribe was downloaded directly to a personal computer, and all storage of information is on my personal computer, which is password-protected. This program used speech-to-text as its process is completed through AI, leaving nothing to humans or the need to send or store information outside of my device, and I manually checked all transcripts against the recordings to ensure the accuracy of the data. All transcripts were entered into Quirkos, a qualitative software program.

Organization

After the interviews had been transcribed, I uploaded the data into Quirkos. I chose Quirkos for data organization because it is easy to use, provides tutorials throughout the entire process, and is compatible with reflexive thematic noting the relationships, comparability and differences in the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Each interview was labeled alphanumerically, for example, "P1." The qualitative research software organized the information to assist me in the process of analyzing the data.

Another feature that was useful in Quirkos was the memo feature, which assisted in creating notes to deepen my understanding of the data while comparing the interpretations of the varying codes and provided me assistance in addressing reliability, credibility, trustworthiness, and the complications of the data analysis process. I used the information collected during the member checking portion of my data analysis process to avoid the possibility of bias, to ensure that the data was credible, and to validate the participants' shared perceptions as suggested by Peel (2020).

Coding Process

I used inductive analysis, which is to “ stay as close to the data as possible “(see Ravitch & Carl, 2021, p.265). Within this analysis process, I used a two-cycle coding process to code the data into themes. Each of the cycles were detailed below.

First Cycle Coding. As part of the coding process, I used first-cycle coding to analyze the interview responses systematically. I assigned initial codes based on keywords and phrases using Quirkos software. I visualized and organized the data efficiently using specific features of this software. Throughout the process, I used the memo-creating feature in Quirkos to record notes and reflections. Finally, I reviewed and refined the codes to ensure an accurate representation of the data, enabling further analysis.

First, in Quirkos, I uploaded the interviews from the iTranscribe software by opening Quirkos, clicking on the import button, and selecting the transcribed interview file from iTranscribe. Once uploaded, I created a new project by clicking on the "New Project" button, naming it, and providing a brief description. Next, I set up the codes

(referred to as "Quirks") by clicking on the "Quirks" tab to create my initial codes, and added new quirks by clicking the "Add Quirk" button. I named each quirk based on the keywords and phrases relevant to my research questions and assigned a color. After this, I went to the source tab where my transcribed interviews were displayed and highlighted text segments corresponding to my initial codes. Then, I dragged and dropped these segments into the appropriate quirk (code) on the right-hand side. I categorized and organized codes by grouping similar quirks to form themes using the group function. I also used the memo-creating feature to add notes and reflections important to the coding and data analysis process by clicking the memo button and typing notes related to the specific segments and quirks. Finally, after the initial coding, I reviewed the codes and corresponding transcript excerpts and refined and merged codes as needed to ensure that the data were organized for further analysis.

Second-Cycle Coding. In the second cycle of coding, I applied axial coding (see Saldaña, 2013) to the first-cycle codes and identified themes relevant to the research questions of a study. I explored the initial codes for relationships and underlying patterns in the data. The initial codes were grouped to form categories and initial themes (see Miles et al., 2014). To complete the second cycle of coding, I reviewed the initial codes related to the research questions and the transcriptions were entered in to Quirkos to finalize the coding of the data. This systematic process helped me understand the qualitative data gathered during the interviews.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, I defined the importance of the rigor of qualitative research, leading to the concept and development of valid studies, which were integral to qualitative research (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). As a qualitative researcher, it was my responsibility to develop in the research design a lens established by specific views of others who do research, are research participants, and those who review the research (see Creswell & Miller, 2000). The criteria used to determine trustworthiness were credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section addressed each of the criteria to meet trustworthiness.

Credibility

The credibility of the findings was a crucial part of the study. The exactness of the collected data and the interpretation of its complexity, as the researcher perceives it, is reflected in how it is presented (Stahl & King, 2020). Creating a research design that supports careful conduct of related educational research and the credibility of the findings highlighted by Peel (2020). By using a qualitative design that is supported by theory, I gathered pertinent data directly from the directors who shared experiences. I disclosed all the data collection and analysis steps. The interview questions were carefully aligned to the research questions of the study and constructed using an interview protocol that allowed me to ask open-ended and probing questions to obtain valid responses from the directors interviewed for the study. Following these processes allowed me to obtain accurate experiences from the directors and avoid the possibility of bias.

Transferability

The results of this study are not easily transferable due to the limitations of a small sample and the design of the examination of perceptions within a specific state. I used rich, thick descriptions of the setting and participants to increase transferability. This was done by structuring my interview questions in the interview protocol around my research questions, probing questions and follow-up questions as suggested by (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I identified participants by alphanumeric labels to mask their identities in the study. I reviewed transcript data by listening to the recording of the interview several times to ensure I captured comments accurately. After this, I invited each participant to review their transcript and make sure their comments were recorded correctly. The participants were allowed to review and correct or edit any comments.

Dependability

Dependability relates to how stable the data are. The researcher must have a justifiable claim for how data were being collected and that the data remains consistent with the argument by answering the research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To provide dependability to the study, I conducted member checks of preliminary findings to determine the accuracy of the data while allowing participants the ability to add to or omit from their initial responses to enhance the dependability and validity of the findings. I ensured the confidentiality of the data by using an alphanumeric framework for each participant.

Confirmability

Miles et al. (2019) a seminal source defined confirmability as seeking confirmable data, also known as “relative neutrality and without bias of the researcher.” I ensured that the data was free from researcher bias and, explicitly, that the data collected were from the participants. I met this requirement of confirmability for this study by ensuring the accuracy of the participants' perceptions, staying as close to the data as possible through the practice of member checking, which was a participant validation strategy to challenge the interpretations of the data for validity (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For transparency, I conducted member checking by sending out the final data analysis to all participants to review.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical procedures ensure that the researcher uses ethical procedures to build trust with participants and value their confidentiality. Rubin and Rubin (2012) accentuated that researchers have a required responsibility to adhere to ethical procedures with no deceit or pressure happening at any time with the participant's and that all participants are treated with respect throughout the entire process and that all promises made to participants are kept. I obtained approval from the IRB at Walden University to conduct the study. To ensure that there was no power differential between me and the possible participants of the study. I did not include anyone whom I currently supervise, work with directly, or within my current place of employment. I shared my identity, my role as a researcher, and the goal of my study.

Once I received approval from the IRB to conduct my study 10-15-24-1015222, I began the recruitment of participants, conducted data collection, and analyzed the data. I conducted member checks as described and ensured that at no time were the participants subject to coercion. I did not react in any way that would make the participant feel marginalized, judged, or distressed. Before collecting data, I obtained physical and verbal consent from the participant. The consent included the purpose of the study and assurance. I protected confidentiality by using an alphanumeric code for each participant.

All data were stored on my personal computer and an external hard drive, which remains in a locked cabinet in my office. I only downloaded software directly to my personal computer; iTranscribe and Quirkos were used for the analysis of data, and all data files were password-protected. Once the final study was published, the data were stored for 5 years beyond completion of my study and then destroyed according to Walden's IRB. I asked each participant for their preferred email to share the final findings of the study with each participant and provided each participant with my contact information to be used to contact me should they have any questions or concerns at the completion of the study.

Summary

In chapter 3 I provided an overview of the methodology, the research rationale, the qualitative design, the researcher's role, procedures for the selection of participants, and instrumentation for the study. In this chapter, I explained the process I followed for participant recruitment, participation, data collection, and analysis. Trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are all described in detail

within this chapter. To address related issues that could present ethical dilemmas, I provided the ethical considerations and the chosen implementation of ethical procedures that were considered and made in the study to ensure equity, respect, and protect the confidentiality of each participant.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. The research questions were as follows:

RQ1: How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe their experiences with training and development for their current leadership role?

RQ2: How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming?

In Chapter 4, a succinct review of the study's purpose and research questions is provided, followed by a detailed account of participant demographics, methodologies for data collection and analysis, approaches taken to ensure trustworthiness, and the presentation of data. I conclude the chapter by providing an exhaustive and interpretive summary of the findings.

Setting

The participants were 13 ECE directors in Colorado serving children from birth to 8 years who work in various areas across the state. The director-large center qualifications in the State of Colorado were met through the following pathways:

- Associate's degree: individuals possessing an Associate's degree in ECE or child development also have to possess 10 credits in ECE along with (455) verifiable experience working with children birth to 8 years in a licensed program.

- Bachelor's, Master's or Doctorate: these degrees must be concentrated in either child development, child psychology, ECE, early childhood special Education, educational leadership and administration, elementary education, family and human development, family studies, or special education, from an accredited college or university, will be deemed director qualified and not required to have verifiable hours working with children birth to 8 years.

To obtain this, their tenure as ECE directors ranged from under 5 to over 25 years. From the total number of participants, 12 (69%) have held ECE director positions for over 5 years, four participants (30%) for under 5 years but not less than 1 year, and seven participants (54%) had formal education. This is crucial to accurately represent the data and the influence it had on the ECE director's perceptions based on educational background and the director's experience. There were no personal or organizational conditions that I was aware of that might have influenced participants or affected the interpretation of the study results.

Demographics

The participants had diverse educational backgrounds and years of experience and represented three different races. Nine of the participants identified as Caucasian, one participant identified as Middle Eastern, and three participants identified as Hispanic. There were no participants in the study representing the Asian, Black, or African American, American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander race. Two participants possessed a doctoral degree, one in ECE and the other in organizational leadership. Two participants possessed a Master's degree, one in Montessori education

and one in ECE. Three participants possessed a bachelor's degree: one in business, one in ECE, and one in interdisciplinary studies. The remainder of the participants had some college or no formal education. All participants were directly qualified based on the state of Colorado's requirements.

Data Collection

I interviewed 13 participants for the study. No personal or organizational conditions were shared by the participants at the time of the study that would have influenced the participants or their experience. All interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews were conducted in private offices, free of distractions and interruptions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes, and two to three interviews were conducted weekly for a total of 5 weeks.

Data were recorded using iTranscribe software, which recorded the audio of the interviews and then generated a transcript of the audio recording. I listened to the audio recordings multiple times while viewing generated transcripts to ensure accuracy. There were no variations to the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3. No unusual circumstances occurred during the data collection process.

Data Analysis

I used inductive analysis, an exploratory and flexible way for researchers to discover insights and phenomena of the study being conducted (see Ravitch & Carl, 2021). My analysis plan consisted of Saldaña's (2013) process for a basic qualitative study, which includes initial coding, pattern coding, and thematic analysis. This was done by using first and second-cycle coding.

First Cycle Coding.

As part of the coding process, I used first-cycle coding to analyze the interview responses systematically using Quirkos. First, I created a new project by clicking on the "New Project" button, naming it, and providing a brief description. I uploaded the interview transcripts from the iTranscribe software by opening Quirkos, clicking on the import button, and selecting all the transcripts of the interviews from iTranscribe. Once uploaded, I set up the first cycle codes (referred to as "Quirks") by clicking on the "Quirks" tab to create my initial codes, which were based on the keywords and phrases relevant to my research questions and assigned a color. There were 222 initial codes identified. After this, I went to the source tab where my transcribed interviews were displayed and highlighted quotes corresponding to my initial codes. Then, I dragged and dropped these quotes into the appropriate quirk (code) on the left-hand side. I categorized and organized codes by grouping similar quirks to form other codes using the group function, which resulted in 12 categories. Finally, after the initial coding, I reviewed the codes and corresponding transcript excerpts numerous times and refined and merged codes as needed to ensure that the data were properly organized for further analysis. A sample of the open codes is included in table one.

Table 1*Sample of Open Codes*

Code	Participant	Quote
Not prepared	P4	“You’re not really prepared.”
Education	P2	“Just wish there was more education.”
Training	P13	“I really feel directors need more training.”

Second-Cycle Coding.

In the second cycle of coding, I applied axial coding to the first-cycle codes and identified categories relevant to the study's research questions (see Saldaña, 2013). I explored the 222 initial codes for relationships and underlying patterns in the data. The initial codes were grouped to form eleven categories (e.g., becoming a director, professional development training, formal education, on-the-job training, no preparation, challenges, family, time, financial, and needed training). To complete the second cycle coding, I applied axial analysis by revisiting the codes generated during the first cycle. I focused on identifying patterns, recurring themes, and key codes to establish categories within the dataset which are shown in table 2. Next, I compared the 11 categories, analyzing their alignment with the research questions and the overarching purpose of the study. I deepened the analysis by grouping subcategories, carefully examining overlaps, contradictions, and emerging patterns within the data. Using Quirkos, I mapped and refined the framework to highlight the main themes. This systematic process helped me understand the qualitative data gathered during the interviews. No discrepant cases were found in the data.

Table 2*Examples of Codes into Categories*

Categories	Codes	Occurrences
Preparation	Not prepared, not offered or given, not provided preparation, lack of specific preparation for the role or challenges of being a director, feeling of being unprepared	26
Needed training	Lack of training, limited or no formal training, no training, inadequate training, leading without training, no operational leadership, or director- specific training	21
Formal education	Leading without formal education, no education, no traditional classes, no educational development, need more general education, ECE content- specific education, no certificate, no degree, higher education, language courses (Spanish)	23

During the analysis process, I followed the conceptual framework of the study, transformational leadership theory, ensuring that individualized consideration, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and idealized influence were reflected in the findings. Systematic coding was used to organize the data into meaningful categories, which were then developed into themes. Four themes provided valuable insight into leadership practices and aligned with the principles of transformational

leadership theory. Examples of the categories to them is illustrated in table 3. By incorporating these elements, the research highlights how leaders support individual growth, inspire a shared vision, encourage critical thinking, and model ethical leadership. This approach reinforced the significance of transformational leadership in fostering high-quality programming and effective leadership development.

Table 3

Examples of Categories to Theme

Themes	Categories
Participants felt unprepared for an ECE directorship	Preparation
	Needed training
	Formal education

Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. Data analysis revealed four key themes: Participants felt unprepared for an ECE directorship, there were multiple paths to becoming an ECE director, ECE directors reported challenges with the time and economics of training and work-life balance, and directors need additional support specific to their position to ensure high-quality programming. The themes that address each RQ are listed in Table 4.

Table 4*Theme Alignment with RQs*

RQ	Themes
RQ1	Theme 1: Participants felt unprepared for an ECE directorship. Theme 2: Multiple pathways to becoming an ECE director. Theme 3: ECE directors reported challenges with the time and economics of training and work-life balance.
RQ2	Theme 4: The need to support directors to provide high-quality programming

Research Question 1

RQ 1 investigated how current ECE directors described their experiences with training and development for their current leadership role. Three themes emerged from the participants' experiences with training and development. First, participants expressed that they were unprepared for an ECE directorship. Second, the participants described multiple pathways to becoming an ECE director. Third, ECE directors reported challenges with the time and economics of training and work-life balance.

Theme 1: Participants Felt Unprepared for an ECE Directorship

Theme 1 encompassed three categories: preparation, formal training, and formal education. Nine codes were identified across these categories and were referenced 44 times by participants, making this the most frequently cited theme. In comparison, Theme 2 received 15 references, and Theme 3 was mentioned 34 times.

Most participants, 11 out of 13, reported feeling unprepared to assume the role of ECE director. P7 noted, "There are so many things you are not prepared for... you're not really that prepared." P9 explained that their academic studies did not equip them

adequately, stating, “I don’t think my studies really prepared, I don’t think I was very prepared.” P4 expressed a similar view, describing how they were “thrown into the role” with no preparation. These comments reflect consistent concerns about the lack of role-specific readiness.

Two participants indicated that they lacked formal training before becoming directors. P1 stated, “I did not have any formal training before becoming a director that would have helped me,” while P10 shared, “I did not know much about being a director.” These accounts pointed to limited access to structured, preservice leadership development at the time of their transition into the director’s role.

Six participants shared that they had no formal education specifically related to ECE directorship. P8 commented, “I didn’t get a certificate,” and P13 added, “I don’t have traditional class experience or college experience... I didn’t get a certificate.” The absence of targeted academic coursework or certifications highlights the variability in educational qualifications among ECE directors.

After entering the field, participants engaged in various professional learning opportunities to develop the competencies needed for leadership. These included agency-based professional development, higher education coursework, mentorship, and experiential learning. P1 described participating in internal trainings, and five participants identified the PDIS as a key resource. P2 described gaining knowledge through “hands-on experiences, workplace transitions, and knowledge through interactions with experienced professionals,” and P7 explained that “mentorship... gave me real tools and

guidance” essential for the director role. These responses show how many relied on informal and in-service learning to build leadership capacity.

Despite these learning experiences, seven participants still reported that they felt inadequately prepared upon assuming the director’s role. Although PDIS is now a requirement for ECE directors in Colorado, the Colorado Shines Rating Administration (2024) Mena report that was conducted , highlights that the Colorado Shines rating system had not been implemented in Colorado and was not made readily available until 2014. P10 recalled, “I really didn’t know what I was doing I had to figure it out,” while P4 noted that “there was no training, just expectations.” P12 acknowledged that formal education alone did not prepare them for practical responsibilities, noting, “I had the education, but that didn’t help me much when it came to managing a team and meeting licensing.” These reflections highlighted the challenges in readiness, even after credentialing measures were introduced.

Some participants emphasized the need for clearer support from regulatory and licensing agencies. P1 explained, “I think having access to clearer guidelines would have helped, especially with Colorado’s rules.” P9 recommended that regulatory bodies take a more active role in offering professional development, suggesting, “Licensing should be offering more training; it should be part of the system.” These remarks underline the perceived importance of formalized training aligned with licensing expectations.

Participants described diverse academic backgrounds, reflecting various pathways to leadership. While three participants held degrees in ECE, others earned credentials in pedagogical studies, interdisciplinary studies, organizational leadership, accounting, and

business administration. P6 explained that their degree was in business and stated, “I had to learn everything on the job.” This diversity highlighted the range of educational routes that ultimately lead to ECE directorship, with varying degrees of relevance to leadership preparation.

Theme 2: There were Multiple Pathways to Becoming an ECE Director

Participants shared that there were multiple paths to becoming an ECE director. Seven of the thirteen ECE directors stated they transitioned into the director’s role after gaining experience in various positions. P3 explained, “I went up the ladder. I started as a volunteer... was then hired as an assistant teacher... became a teacher... took an infant nursery supervisor position... moved to an assistant director, and shortly I became a director.” P7 reported, “I was the assistant director of my program before I became a director.” P5 stated, “I got a job teaching... moved back up rapidly into... more of a place holder position... to being a teacher/director to being an assistant director... then becoming a director.” These examples illustrate the range of experiences that served as steppingstones into leadership, highlighting how professional growth in ECE often follows a non-linear, practice-based track.

Six of the 13 ECE directors took paths that did not include moving through various positions. P4 shared that though s/he had been a teacher in a classroom, s/he became a director when the management approached, stating, “We are firing this director! You need to step in and take over.” P2 described this type of advancement as “falling into the position.” P6 started as a business owner of an early childhood center and met director qualifications through PDIS. Others obtained formal education or in

PDIS. P9 said, “I went back to... community college to get director - qualified.” P8 had taken some college courses and explained that s/he became director-qualified “mainly through the PDIS.” P11 shared that before becoming a director, “I was a coach and an ECSE, so I went through the coaching credential and the training credential ... obtained a Master’s degree,” to meet the director’s qualifications for the State of Colorado.

Theme 3: ECE Directors Reported Challenges with the Time and Economics of Training and Work-Life Balance

The analysis of the data shows 10 of the 13 participants specified they experienced limitations, barriers, and challenges before and after becoming ECE directors. Three main challenges emerged from the data: financial struggles, time constraints, and family responsibilities. These barriers affected their ability to access education, maintain credentials, and juggle professional and personal obligations.

Financial challenges were a major concern for participants. Before becoming directors, many faced difficulties affording formal education and training. P11 identified money as a significant barrier, explaining that financial constraints limited access to necessary qualifications. P2 emphasized the high costs involved, describing the financial burden as a substantial obstacle to completing training and education. P12 reflected on their experience, explaining that they had to take on significant debt to pursue their career goals.

These financial burdens did not disappear after participants became directors. P4 described ongoing efforts to pay off college coursework that was required to maintain director credentials in the State of Colorado. The costs associated with professional

development remained an ongoing challenge, particularly given salary limitations in the field. P3 commented on compensation challenges within ECE, noting that educators often face financial constraints and must complete additional coursework every 5 years to remain in compliance with state requirements.

Time constraints posed another challenge. Before securing leadership roles, directors found it difficult to balance studies with other commitments. P6 stated, “It took me a long time to get my director’s certificate.” P9 reflected, “Before you have the position as a director, you dedicate your time to studies.” Once in leadership, the demands on time did not ease for participants. P10 remarked, “Time is a big one for directors, for me it used to be time,” highlighting the ongoing time constraints faced in the director role. Similarly, P1 explained, “By the time I had it (director position) ... [it had been] five to seven years since taking the courses,” indicating a gap between formal preparation and the realities of the leadership position. These accounts reflect participants’ perceptions that time pressures continued, and, in some cases, intensified after transitioning into directorship.

Before becoming directors, many struggled to balance education with caregiving duties. P4 shared, “I was a mother of three, so family obligations,” and P3 recalled, “Personal life obstacles, single mom, all that kind of stuff really hindered me. Got pregnant and stopped going to school for a really long time.” After transitioning into leadership, balancing work and family remained a challenge. P10 acknowledged, “Train and work and balance...family life...a lot of directors are not working 9 to 5, they work

more than that.” P4 also noted the lasting financial burden on families, stating, “Student loans are a huge burden on the family,” leading to continued struggles.

In summary, ECE directors described their experiences with leadership preparation as fractured, inadequate, and generally through informal pathways. Most felt unprepared for the ECE directorship, attributing limited access to role-specific training, formal education, and pre-service development. While many pursued in-service learning through mentorship, PDIS, and experiential practice, gaps in readiness persisted. Directors entered leadership through varied pathways, some advancing through ECE roles, others transitioning unexpectedly or by utilizing the State professional development system. The ECE directors in the study described barriers such as financial hardship, time constraints, and caregiving responsibilities, which further complicated access to training and sustainability in the role. These findings highlight the need for systematic, equitable leadership development systems that align credentialing, regulatory reinforcement, and feasible preparation for the development and sustainability of ECE leadership.

Research Question 2

RQ 2 was used to investigate the perceptions of current ECE directors in Colorado regarding the support, training, and resources necessary to develop their roles and facilitate high-quality programming. The one theme that emerged from the participants' shared experiences and insights was the need to support directors to provide high-quality programming.

Theme 4: Directors Need Additional Supports Specific to Their Position to Ensure High-Quality Programming

Participants identified ongoing professional support as critical to sustaining high-quality programming in their roles as ECE directors. All thirteen participants expressed the need for networking, mentorship, and individual coaching. As P5 stated, “Anybody taking on a new role that is responsible for people, you really want more of a support system,” capturing the collective emphasis on structured peer support. Participants described how establishing connections with other directors facilitated shared learning, professional collaboration, and problem-solving within leadership contexts. Several directors reported that engaging with peers from other counties, council representatives, and early learning programs supported quality improvement and informed their decision-making. These examples illustrate how collaboration contributed to directors’ efforts to maintain and enhance program quality across diverse organizational settings.

Mentorship and coaching were identified as critical support for directors in their leadership roles. P7 described mentorship as an opportunity to learn from someone with more experience, noting, “Mentorship, I think... to have an opportunity to work with someone who has more experience and who maybe has done some of the things that you haven’t had an opportunity to do, just seeing their insight and the benefits of that.” Alongside mentorship, P2 and P4 emphasized the importance of coaching, with P2 stating, “I need... some sort of coaching,” and P4 specifying reflective coaching and reflective consultation as the types of coaching needed.

Four participants (P4, P8, P9, and P13) specifically discussed coaching as essential for building effective teaching teams and supporting program quality. P13 shared, “Coaching is something I need to help support my role,” reinforcing how directors view ongoing guidance as part of their development. Participants pointed to reflective consultation and skill-building strategies as integral to team growth and improving outcomes in ECE settings.

In summary, ECE directors in Colorado affirmed the critical need for support and training to develop in their role and facilitate high-quality programming. All thirteen participants identified a critical need for networking, mentorship, and individual coaching to be the essential resources for leadership development and to improve programming. The ECE directors highlighted that establishing connections with other directors perpetuated shared learning, professional collaboration, and problem-solving, directly connecting it with the role of an ECE director. These findings support the relevance of obtaining ongoing, relational supports designed to the particular demands of ECE leadership.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Guba (1981) recommends adhering to “validity criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to strengthen the trustworthiness of a qualitative research study and to ensure credibility and rigor” (p.83) in the qualitative research. Credibility is the degree to which research findings and interpretations can be trusted, ensuring they are thorough, well-reasoned, and firmly grounded in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure credibility in the study, I conducted semistructured

interviews and probed questions to obtain data saturation. I used a reflection journal throughout the study to document my assumptions, biases, and experiences with ECE leadership. Once the transcription of the interviews was completed, I emailed each participant's transcript to them for their review, offering them the opportunity to clarify, add to, or omit comments. Member checks were followed during the analysis phase, where I shared preliminary findings by email with the participants to confirm alignment with their perspectives and ensure their voices were accurately represented. None of the participants responded to the findings.

Transferability involves providing enough detail for readers to assess whether findings are relevant to other contexts through the application of findings or concepts that include people, contexts, and times (Drisko, 2025). I ensured this by clearly describing participant recruitment, interview process, and data analysis. I also included rich descriptions of participant experiences and direct quotes from the interview transcripts, allowing readers to determine how the study's results might apply to similar settings. In addition to these practices, I also completed a discrepant case analysis to ensure the transferability of the study.

Dependability in qualitative research encompasses confirming the findings are consistent, trustworthy and stable (Burkholder et al., 2019). I kept clear records at every stage and maintained a transparent audit trail. Using an interview protocol, I gathered authentic responses without influencing participants. I verified accuracy through multiple transcript reviews and member checking. For member checking, an email was sent to the participants with the initial findings, providing them with the option to comment on the

findings related to their perceptions of what they shared during the interviews. None of the participants responded to the email. Data saturation was reached when no new patterns, codes, or themes emerged.

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the process of identifying and mitigating biases in data interpretation through structured reflexivity, ensuring that findings are “grounded in participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's assumptions” (Ravitch & Carl, 2021, 171). To enhance transparency and track coding decisions systematically, I utilized Quirkos to visually organize the data, allowing for clear documentation of analytical processes. I also verified transcriptions produced by iTranscribe to ensure the accuracy of recorded interviews, which contributed to the development of a structured audit trail from the transcribed data. Additionally, I incorporated member checking as a validation technique, providing participants with the opportunity to review and confirm that the findings accurately represented their experiences and perspectives.

Summary

In Chapter 4, I presented the data analysis for this study, utilizing a basic qualitative design to examine two research questions: how current ECE directors in Colorado describe their experiences with training and development for their leadership role, and what support, training, and resources they identify as necessary for effective leadership and high-quality programming. In this chapter I include details on the study's setting, data collection through semistructured interviews with 13 participants, and an explanation of the qualitative data analysis process. Four key themes emerged: first, most

participants felt unprepared for directorship, with many reporting a lack of prior preparation, formal training, or education. Second, multiple pathways to directorship were identified, some transitioned after various ECE roles, while others entered through non-traditional routes, including business ownership and credentialing through the Professional Development Information System (PDIS). Third, participants described various challenges they faced before and after becoming directors, including financial constraints, time limitations, and balancing responsibilities in work, education, and caregiving. Lastly, participants expressed a need for additional support specific to their roles, particularly in mentorship, coaching, and opportunities for collaboration to strengthen leadership and program effectiveness.

In this chapter, I also addressed strategies used to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The methods included using probing questions in semistructured interviews to achieve data saturation, maintaining a reflective journal, conducting transcript reviews, engaging in member checking, incorporating peer debriefing, developing a transparent audit trail, and analyzing discrepant cases. Since no contradictory findings were identified, further analysis was not required. In chapter 5 I constructed these findings by discussing study limitations, recommendations, and expansive implications. It provides a detailed examination of each theme, connecting them to the research questions and literature review from Chapter 2, while also outlining study limitations and strategies to address them. The Dissertation concludes by identifying potential areas for future research, exploring connections to social change, and summarizing the overall study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. I collected data by conducting semistructured interviews via the Zoom platform. The participants were 13 ECE directors in Colorado serving children from birth to 8 years who worked in various areas across the state, working in a center-based program, were director-qualified in the State PDIS (Colorado Shines) approved qualifications, with at least one year in their current role. Four themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) participants felt unprepared for an ECE directorship. (b) multiple pathways to becoming an ECE director, (c) participants encountered limitations, barriers, and challenges before and after becoming ECE directors, and (d) directors need additional support specific to their position to ensure high-quality programming. In Chapter 5, I explain the findings of the study while providing a clear understanding of Colorado ECE directors' experiences, and the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming. I used transformational leadership theory to frame the research findings and compare conclusions with current literature. I provide the implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research in this chapter. I conclude the chapter with my reflection on the study.

Interpretation of the Findings

Analysis of the data revealed four key themes that captured how early ECE directors experience the realities of stepping into leadership roles, growing

professionally, and managing ongoing systemic barriers. The data were both supported and built upon existing research, while also highlighting the important gaps in how directors are prepared and supported. These inconsistencies pointed to immense issues in leadership development, access to resources, and long-term sustainability in the field.

Theme 1: Participants Felt Unprepared for an ECE Directorship

The results of this study substantiate prior research, which highlights the absence of professional workforce discussions regarding the need for professional preparation and continued education for administrative leadership of early childhood programs considering the current workforce crisis (Talan & Magid, 2021). Eleven of the 13 participants described entering the director's role without adequate preparation. Participants frequently reported that their academic programs did not include coursework in important areas such as curriculum planning, regulatory compliance, and staff supervision. These results indicate that academic pathways to leadership frequently do not correspond with the daily responsibilities of an ECE director, resulting in new leaders lacking the foundational tools needed to lead effectively.

The data from Theme 1 shows that it corroborated the results from the Talan and Magid (2021) study, noting ECE early childhood leadership gaps consisting of a deficit of dependable policies and supports for improving the qualifications and aptitude of leaders in ECE programs. Almost half of the participants in the study assumed leadership roles without formal credentials or targeted pre-service training. One participant shared, "I was thrown into the role," capturing the abrupt and unsupported nature of their

transition. The results show this lack of scaffolding delayed participants' ability to establish systems, build trust, and lead with confidence.

The results further confirmed Friedman-Krauss et al. (2022), who noted that less funding and little support for gains in learning and development, and programs lowering the educational standards due to staff shortages, is leading to lower quality programs. The data suggest that they may put pressure on new directors to learn by making mistakes, which could possibly make them less effective as leaders and more likely to burn out.

The results from the analysis of the data contradicted assumptions in literature that ECE directors are adequately prepared to foster collaborative and relational leadership practices from the outset (Myran & Masterson, 2021). While participants expressed a strong desire to build trust and shared decision-making structures, they reported limited training in relational leadership strategies. These findings suggested that current preparation systems do not sufficiently address the interpersonal dimensions of leadership, which are essential for building cohesive teams and promoting professional empowerment.

Finally, the findings confirmed Talan and Magid, (2021), who emphasized the importance of including issues regarding professional preparation and continued education for leaders in the discussions about clarification of the professional workforce framework especially considering the current workforce crisis. Participants came from a range of academic backgrounds, including business, interdisciplinary studies, and accounting, with only a few holding degrees in ECE. This variability resulted in inconsistent readiness for leadership. These findings point to the need for a universal,

role-aligned preparation model that ensures all directors, regardless of background, are equipped with the competencies necessary to lead effectively.

Theme 2: There were Multiple Pathways to Becoming an ECE Director

The findings of this study confirmed Kirby et al (2021), who documented the various entry points into ECE leadership. At least half of the participants advanced from within early learning environments, while others entered through unexpected promotion, entrepreneurial ventures, or by meeting qualifications through systems like the PDIS. These findings suggested that while flexible pathways support accessibility, they also contributed to inconsistent readiness, as directors arrive with vastly different levels of preparation and leadership experience.

The findings support the literature findings of Talan and Magid (2021 and Myran and Masterson, 2021, who argued that there needs to be more development and refined training offered to program leaders to be more competent in pedagogical knowledge, and structured preparation in leadership competencies. Regardless of how they entered the role, many participants reported lacking formal training in communication, supervision, curriculum development, and regulatory guidance. These gaps were consistent across participants and suggest that the absence of intentional leadership development delays directors' ability to implement quality programming and lead with confidence.

While participants expressed a desire to foster collaboration and empowerment, these practices often emerged informally and over time. Based on the data, this gradual evolution into leadership limited early opportunities to build strong team dynamics and delayed the development of relational leadership practices. The findings about the

multiple pathways supported (Grantham-Caston & DiCarlo, 2021) emphasize that effective ECE leadership is creating collaborative partnerships within the community, surrounding themselves with others who possess skills they do not meet the needs of others and meet all program requirements.

Another important finding from this study was that, without systematic support, ECE directors struggle to establish the trust and shared vision necessary for long-term program improvement. This finding confirmed Myran and Masterson (2020), who called for leadership models that move beyond compliance and address the relational dimensions of organizational growth. Participants frequently cited external pressures such as accountability demands, limited resources, and time constraints as barriers to developing collaborative leadership early in their tenure.

Finally, within the data for Theme 2, there was confirmation of studies like Perlman et al. (2020), who emphasized the central role of ECE directors in shaping program quality and child development. Beyond those findings, however, participants acknowledged the importance of their leadership but described relying heavily on trial-and-error learning due to the lack of pre-service preparation. This finding extended current literature by showing that both experiential and formal routes into leadership must be supported by intentional, relationally grounded systems.

Theme 3: ECE Directors Reported Challenges with the Time and Economics of Training and Work-life Balance.

Within the data analyzed for Theme 3, there were multiple findings that confirmed current research in the field of ECE. For instance, Movahedazarhouligh et al

(2023) identified a lack of attention to leadership development and sustainability and low pay in ECE in the United States. The findings related to challenges illustrated that 10 of the 13 participants described facing significant challenges both before and after assuming ECE leadership roles. Financial hardship, time constraints, and family responsibilities were the most frequently cited obstacles. These findings suggest that systemic pressures reduce access to leadership pathways and contribute to instability in the ECE workforce.

Participants described struggling to afford the training and coursework required to become director-qualified, with some incurring substantial student loan debt. Financial strain persisted even after assuming leadership roles. This aligned with Friedman-Krauss et al. (2022) who noted less funding is being provided to support training and professional development and that ECE leadership is declining. Together, these suggest that without financial support structures, directors are forced to prioritize survival over long-term leadership development.

The findings related to time constraints and balance directly supported those of Kelton and Talan (2023), who reported that long work hours and limited access to professional learning are common challenges for ECE directors. Participants described how time constraints, especially when balancing education, work, and caregiving, delayed their ability to complete qualifications or engage in leadership development. These findings suggest that excessive workloads not only delay leadership growth but also reduce opportunities for innovation and staff development.

Participants reported struggling with time constraints due to long hours, maintaining a work-life balance, and keeping up with compliance requirements for the

ECE director's credentials. Farewell et al, (2022) and Ford et al, (2024) both found that there was poor psychological well-being, depression high workloads experienced by ECE leaders recommending that more interventions and supports are needed for ECE leaders and educators to avoid these forms of struggle and avoid stress and burnout which lead to excessive turnover. Participants described cumulative pressures caused by compliance demands, long hours, and the absence of embedded mentorship or wellness resources. These findings suggested that burnout may result not only from workload volume but also from the lack of relational and emotional support.

Participants described difficulty balancing compliance requirements with instructional and relational leadership responsibilities. These difficulties echoed Douglass et al. (2022), Grantham-Caston and DiCarlo (2023), and Kirby et al. (2023), who all argued that professional learning and leadership development are critical to job satisfaction and retention but remain difficult to access. These findings suggest that without integrated, accessible leadership development, directors are left to navigate complex roles without the tools to lead effectively.

The findings of professional learning and leadership development and their relation to retention also confirmed Kwon et al. (2020) who emphasized that staff were more likely to leave due to difficulties with leadership. While some participants reported efforts to build emotionally supportive teams, these practices were often reactive and delayed. These findings suggest that without pre-service preparation and early support, directors may struggle to establish strong workplace cultures.

Finally, among the notable findings were that ECE directors continued to experience financial struggles due to salary limitations. This finding of financial struggles and salary limitations affirms Caven et al. (2021) who suggest that wages are the primary indicator that leads to turnover in ECE centers. Participants described persistent financial instability even after assuming leadership roles. These findings of instability suggest that leadership practices cannot thrive in structurally unsupportive environments, regardless of a director's commitment or vision.

Theme 4: Directors Need Additional Supports Specific to Their Position to Ensure High-Quality Programming

Farnham et al. (2020) and Douglass et al. (2022) linked that nurturing effective leadership growth can be approached by using peer-to-peer support and development structured professional support and approaching practices from a collective mindset. Analysis of the data revealed that all 13 participants emphasized the importance of professional support in sustaining high-quality programming, underpinning that structured support systems enhance leadership confidence and contribute directly to program quality and staff cohesion.

Studies by Rodd (2020) and Lee et al. (2022) highlight the importance of mentorship and coaching in early childhood leadership development. Participants in this study consistently described mentorship as foundational rather than optional. These findings align with the existing literature and suggest that coaching and reflective consultation are particularly effective in helping directors build strong teaching teams and foster a culture of continuous learning.

Within Theme 4, the findings contradicted assumptions that professional support structures are systematically available to ECE leaders, as noted by P5, who stated, “we’re limited to basically like Facebook groups and ... random listservs.” Participants reported that access to mentorship and coaching was inconsistent and often self-initiated. These findings suggested that many directors must seek support independently, often after assuming leadership roles, which delays leadership development and limits early opportunities to lead collaboratively.

Finally, the analysis of data from Theme 4 confirmed the study findings of Shore et al (2021), who advocated collaborative professional development models tailored to directors. Participants described peer engagement as a critical source of growth, emotional support, and professional well-being. These findings affirmed that director-focused learning communities are just as vital as those designed for teaching staff and are essential for building leadership capacity.

Limitations of the Study

When conducting this study, several limitations were present. One limitation was the small sample size, which included 13 center-based ECE directors. Although this number allowed for total data saturation through semistructured interviews, the sample was drawn from 32 center-based programs in Colorado, potentially limiting broader applicability. Another limitation was the possibility of researcher bias. As an active member of the ECE community, my involvement could have influenced aspects of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. I addressed this by following the interview protocol and engaging in regular reflection to reduce bias. Finally, the use of a single type

of data from one geographic region also served as a limitation. These factors together may have influenced the study's transferability.

Recommendations

Results from this study have the potential to support previous research and inform changes to mitigate the gap in practice on the development of ECE directors. All the participants in the study were ECE directors in Colorado center-based programs. The participants described feeling unprepared, needing further support, and experiencing challenges before and after becoming directors. I recommend that further research should be conducted to move beyond learn-as-you-go leadership. Further research could explore the development of an extensive framework for early childhood leadership preparation that reflects the realities of directorship across diverse program settings. Participants highlighted that there was limited access to director and leadership training, formal education, and pre-service development. While many pursued agency-based professional development, mentorship, and experiential learning before becoming ECE directors, these supports were insufficient to meet the complexity of their responsibilities. Additional studies could examine how implementing targeted pre-service training programs, delineated pathways into directorship, financial support mechanisms, statewide mentorship initiatives, flexible credentialing options, embedded coaching within quality improvement systems, and more defined guidance from licensing agencies could improve outcomes. To strengthen the ECE leadership framework, it requires a partnership with all stakeholders along with a commitment to accessibility and sustainability, which will

ensure directors are both adequately prepared and continuously supported throughout their professional journey (Fu, 2022; Lee et al., 2022).

In addition to changes to the ECE leadership framework, participants highlighted that embedded mentorship, coaching, and peer networking are crucial within professional development systems. Further research could identify how embedding mentorship, coaching, and peer networking enhances professional development systems.

Additionally, collaboration with other directors, council representatives, and other early learning professionals supports shared learning and enhanced decision-making. Future research may provide evidence-based details about how offering more opportunities for collaboration with other early learning professionals can improve shared learning and enhance decision-making. The participants also highlighted reflective coaching and consultation as key in the development of strong teaching teams and high-quality programming. Ensuring these supports are embedded into professional development systems can help to improve retention across the workforce.

This results show the need to address barriers such as financial hardship, time constraints, and caregiving responsibilities that participants noted limited their access to formal training, education, and credentialing. The Participants shared experiences about the significant obstacles they had in affording coursework, time constraints, and work-life balance. To promote equity in leadership pathways, I recommend that further research be conducted to investigate if investing in flexible training formats, tuition reimbursement and stipends, and recognition of multiple entry points into directorship, including experiential learning, business ownership, and interdisciplinary backgrounds may

influence change in the development of a resilient and representative leadership framework that reflects the diversity and complexity of the early childhood workforce.

Implications

The results of the study contribute to ongoing efforts to strengthen the workforce, elevate practice, and guide policy toward lasting and positive social change. These include improving family engagement and stability, policy shifts towards equity in ECE systems, enhancing workforce development, reducing intergenerational trauma, and increasing the use of evidence-based practices, all of which reflect the implications for positive social change. This results of the study highlight that improving the preparation and support of ECE directors may lead to meaningful changes. Personally, ECE directors may feel more validated when they see how their journey to leadership is reflected in evidence-based research, especially for individuals who took nontraditional pathways and those who reported feeling unprepared for the ECE directorship role. This sense of recognition can encourage self-advocacy and a deeper commitment to professional growth, which may translate into stronger confidence and effectiveness in leadership. When ECE directors recognize their own experiences in research, it can also normalize the challenges they face and offer a pathway to targeted development.

Stronger support for ECE directors has the potential to influence family well-being directly. ECE directors, who are well-prepared and provided with professional support, will be more prepared to lead their teams, meet the regulatory requirements, and achieve high-quality programming. These factors will ensure that children and families receive nurturing and consistent care with fewer disruptions to services within the ECE

setting. Consistency and achievement of high-quality standards in leadership can influence and benefit children's development and bolster the trust that families have in the ECE system.

At the organizational level, the findings underscore the importance of providing mentorships, coaching, and enhanced peer learning. Participants consistently cite these supports as essential to improving team dynamics and leadership readiness. Such structures may reduce burnout, turnover, and improve retention, especially when paired with opportunities such as collaborative ongoing consultation and professional development (Elek et al., 2024). When transformational leadership development is provided, resilience and sustainability can be achieved. Additionally, the findings from the study can influence decisions made at the policy level related to how ECE directors obtain credentials and how trainings are designed and presented. This can also expand entry pathways that acknowledge prior learning while making credentialing more flexible, which are key to building inclusiveness in leadership. Policies that address the financial constraints, time limitations, and offer better guidance can make leadership roles for ECE directors more attainable and equitable across diverse communities. When system barriers are removed, policymakers can better support leadership development across the state.

Using the methodical process in this study, it emphasizes the relevance of qualitative research in upholding the shared voices of professionals in the ECE field. By providing in-depth interviews, ECE directors' lived experiences, and nuanced insight can inform meaningful recommendations. Theoretically, the findings suggest that leadership

development be reformed to emphasize relational, experiential, and systematic support and not rely on focusing only on technical competencies. In practice, this study found the importance of strengthening pre-service preparation, the need to create flexible credentialing options, and to invest in ECE director-centered development programs utilizing what the participants stated were needed. When there is a focus on actionable supports along with inclusive leadership pathways, these findings promote social change, which is achievable and grounded in the realities of ECE leadership. When these supports are intertwined into policy and practice, it offers real opportunities to improve professionals, families, and the field of ECE.

By focusing on actionable supports and inclusive leadership pathways, these findings promote social change that is both achievable and grounded in the realities of ECE leadership. Advancing equity, improving retention, and strengthening program quality depend on building systems that emulate the lived experiences of ECE directors and the complexity of their roles. When these supports are woven into policy and practice, they offer real opportunities to uplift professionals, families, and the field of ECE.

Based on the results of this study, the findings suggest that there is a need for improving preparation and support for ECE directors, especially in Colorado. The participants strongly report feeling unprepared to assume the role, citing a lack of formal training and education specific to directorship. Although some pursued additional learning after entering the field, many still experienced gaps in readiness that interfere with their ability to lead effectively.

The data collected for the study also reveals that directors entered their roles through multiple pathways, often progressing from positions like teacher, assistant director, or volunteer. Others transitioned into leadership due to unexpected circumstances or entrepreneurial ventures, relying on PDIS, coaching credentials, or formal education to qualify. These varied routes emphasize the need for a flexible, practice-based leadership model that validates experiential learning while offering equitable access to advancement (Kirby et al, 2021).

Participants describe facing limitations, barriers, and challenges both before and after becoming directors, particularly in terms of finances, time, and family responsibilities. Financial hardship was a consistent concern, from affording initial education and training to managing ongoing credentialing costs. Time constraints added pressure, making it difficult to complete coursework while juggling caregiving or full-time work. ECE directors also highlight the lasting impact of student debt on personal and family life, pointing to structural issues in how leadership preparation is funded and supported.

Support systems specific to the ECE director's role were identified as critical to sustaining high-quality programming. All 13 directors shared the need for mentorship, coaching, and professional networks to build leadership capacity. Reflective coaching and consultation were especially valued by the participants as a way of improving team dynamics and guiding strategic decision-making. Participants emphasized that learning from experienced peers and accessing collaborative communities helped them navigate challenges and enhance quality improvement efforts across programs.

Conclusion

This study confirms that Colorado's ECE directors are stepping into ECE directorships through diverse, often informal pathways and navigating complex roles with limited preparation and support. Using a basic qualitative study, I explored ECE directors' lived experiences and the support, training, and resources needed to lead high-quality teaching teams. Through semistructured interviews with 13 participants, I gained detailed insight into the gaps in practices that shape ECE directors' development.

Despite financial hardships, time constraints, and unbalanced access to formal guidance, ECE directors expressed strong commitment to programming, staff, children and families. Their stories reveal the need for standardized support that recognizes professional expertise and provides sustainable pathways into leadership. By centering their voices, this study brings attention to the structures required to prepare, mentor, and retain effective ECE directors.

The findings point toward actionable opportunities to improve Colorado's ECE leadership infrastructure from targeted pre-service training and flexible credentialing to embedded coaching and professional networks. Leadership in ECE should not be left to chance; it must be intentionally cultivated and continuously supported.

References

- Alegbeleye, I. D., & Kaufman, E. K. (2020). Relationship between middle managers' transformational leadership and effective followership behaviors in organizations. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 13*(4), 6–19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21673>
- Allee-Herndon, K. A., Roberts, S. K., Hu, B., Clark, M. H., & Stewart, M. L. (2022). Let's talk play! Exploring the possible benefits of play-based pedagogy on language and literacy Learning in two Title I kindergarten classrooms. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 50*(1), 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01141-6>
- Avari, P., Hamel, E., Schachter, R. E., & Hatton-Bowers, H. (2022). Communication with families: Understanding the perspectives of early childhood teachers. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 21*(2), 241-255. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X221140747>
- Avolio, B. J., & Bass, B. M. (1998). You can drag a horse to water but you can't make it drink unless it is thirsty. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 5*(1), 4-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107179199800500102>
- Bagnato, S. J., Macy, M., Dionne, C., Smith, N., Robinson Brock, J., Larson, T., Londono, M., Fevola, A., Bruder, M. B., & Cranmer, J. (2024). Authentic assessment for early childhood intervention: In-vivo & virtual practices for interdisciplinary professionals. *Perspectives on Early Childhood Psychology and Education, 8*(1). <https://doi.org/10.58948/2834-8257.1066>

- Bakker, A. B., Hetland, J., Olsen, O. K., & Espevik, R. (2022). Daily transformational leadership: A source of inspiration for follower performance? *European Management Journal*, 1(1). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2022.04.004>
- Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics* 18. 19-31. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616\(90\)90061-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0090-2616(90)90061-S)
- Bassok, D., Magouirk, P., & Markowitz, A. J. (2021). Systemwide quality improvement in early childhood education: Evidence from Louisiana. *AERA Open*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211011610>
- Beach, P. (2025). Research on early literacy in Reggio and Montessori classrooms: A scoping review. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 25(3), 694-722. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687984231186090>
- Bellows, L., Bassok, D., & Markowitz, A. J. (2022). Teacher turnover in early childhood education: Longitudinal evidence from the universe of publicly funded programs in Louisiana. *Educational Researcher*, 51(9), 565–574. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221131505>
- Bendini, M., & Devercelli, A. (2022). *Quality early learning: nurturing children's potential*. World Bank Publications. <https://doi.org/10.1596/978-1-4648-1795-3>
- Bhutta, Z. A., Bhavnani, S., & Betancourt, T. S. (2023). Adverse childhood experiences and lifelong health. *Nature Medicine*, 29, 1639-1648. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-023-02426-0>

- Blewitt, C., Morris, H., Nolan, A., Jackson, K., Barrett, H., & Skouteris, H. (2020). Strengthening the quality of educator-child interactions in early childhood education and care settings: A conceptual model to improve mental health outcomes for preschoolers. *Early Child Development and Care, 190*(7), 1–14.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1507028>
- Bosire, J. P. O., Gallagher, K. C., Garrett, A. L., & Babchuk, W. (2023). Early childhood leadership well-being: A phenomenological examination of workplace stress and supports. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 21*(4), 412-425.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231164131>
- Bratsch-Hines, M., Ginsburg, G., & Cox, A. (2023). Using professional learning to foster distributed leadership and equity of voice in early childhood education. *Professional Development in Education, 49*(6), 1131-1151.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2023.2238731>
- Bricker, D., Dionne, C., Grisham, J., Johnson, J. J., Macy, M., Slentz, K., & Waddell, M. (2022). AEPS®-3 ready set. In D. Bricker, C. Dionne, J. Grisham, J.J. Johnson, M. Macy, K. Slentz, & M. Waddell (Eds.), *Assessment, evaluation, and programming system for infants and children* (3rd ed.). Brookes Publishing.
- Brillante, P.; Chen, J. J.; Cuevas, S.; Dunderf, C.; Brown Hoffman, E.; Meier, D.R.; Mindes, G.; Roy, L.R. (Eds.) (2023). *Casebook: Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*. NAEYC

- Brophy-Herb, H. E., Brincks, A., Cook, J. L., Stacks, A., Vallotton, C. D., Frosch, C., & Jennings, P. A. (2022). Stress intensity and exhaustion among infant and toddler teachers: Descriptive analysis and associations with sources of stress and coping strategy use. *Early Education and Development*, 34(7), 1545–1564.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2022.2151399>
- Bryant, D., Yazejian, N., Jang, W., Kuhn, L., Hirschstein, M., Soliday Hong, S. L., & Stein, A. (2023). Retention and turnover of teaching staff in a high-quality early childhood network. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 65, 159–169.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.06.002>
- Burchinal, M. C., & Farran, D. C. (2020). What does research tell us about ECE programs. In *Getting it right: Using implementation research to improve outcomes in early care and education*(pp. 13-36). Foundation for Child Development.
- Burkholder, G. J., Cox, K. A., Crawford, L. M., & Hitchcock, J. H. (Eds.). (2019). *Research design and methods: An applied guide for the scholar-practitioner*. Sage Publications.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row.
- Burris, J. (2020). Childcare directors' comfort and interest in technology and professional development. *Journal of Research in Education*, 29(2), 1–25.
- Busetto, L., Wick, W., & Gumbinger, C. (2020). How to use and assess qualitative research methods. *Neurological Research and practice*, 2(1), Article 14.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s42466-020-00059-z>

- Californians Quality Early Learning. (2023). *The vital role of the director in early childcare: Demystifying duties and frequently asked questions* (caqualityearlylearning.org)
- Cameron, C. E., Kenny, S., & Chen, Q. H. (2023). How head start professionals use and perceive teaching strategies, gold: associations with individual characteristics including assessment conceptions. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, Article 121, 103931. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2022.103931>
- Canavesi, A., & Minelli, E. (2021). Servant leadership: A systematic literature review and network analysis. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 34(3), 267-289. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10672-021-09381-3>
- Cankaya, O., Rohatyn-Martin, N., Leach, J., Taylor, K., & Bulut, O. (2023). Preschool children's loose parts play and the relationship to cognitive development: A review of the literature. *Journal of Intelligence*, 11(8), Article 151. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jintelligence11080151>
- Cascio, E. U. (2021). *Early childhood education in the United States: What, when, where, who, how, and why* [NBER working paper No 28722]. National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w28722>
- Caven, M., Khanani, N., Zhang, X., & Parker, C. E. (2021). *Center- and program-level factors associated with turnover in the early childhood education workforce* (ED611677). ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED611677.pdf>

- Changar, M., & Atan, T. (2021). The Role of transformational and transactional leadership approaches on environmental and ethical aspects of CSR. *Sustainability*, *13*(3), Article1411. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13031411>
- Charlot-Swilley, D., Zuskov, S., Curtis, L., Mitchell, S., & Anderson, E. (2025). Fostering workforce wellness: Insights from nurse managers and early childhood educators. *Healthcare*, *13*(5), Article 487. <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare13050487>
- Chaudry, A., & Sandstrom, H. (2020). Child Care and Early Education for Infants and Toddlers. *Future of Children*, *30*(2), 165–190 <http://doi/10.1353/foc.2020.a807756>
- Chaudry, A., Morrissey, T., Weiland, C., & Yoshikawa, H. (2021). Cradle to kindergarten: A new plan to combat inequality. Russell Sage Foundation. <https://doi.org/10.7758/9781610449069>
- Chen, T., & Wu, C. (2020). Can newcomers perform better at hotels? Examining the roles of transformational leadership, supervisor-triggered positive affect, and perceived supervisor support. *Tourism Management Perspectives*, *33*, Article 100587. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2019.100587>
- Clayback, K. A., Williford, A., Vitiello, V., & Matthew, K. L. (2024). Supporting all learners through high-quality early childhood curricula: STREAMin3 implementation across Virginia. *Frontiers in Education*, *9*, Article 1494464. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2024.1494464>

- Clement, S., Kent, K., & Duursma, E. (2020). Literacy beyond the home and the classroom: public environmental print and children's literacy. *Children's Geographies*, 19(1), 37–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2020.1725442>
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (2023). *Early childhood professional credential (ECPC)*. <https://cdec.colorado.gov/early-childhood-professional-credential>
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (2023a). *Free early childhood education 1011 and 1031 courses*. [Colorado Department of Early Childhood](https://www.coloradodepartmentofearlychildhood.com/1011-and-1031-courses)
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (2023b). *About Early Childhood Competencies: Colorado's competencies for early childhood center directors and related administrators*. <https://www.coloradoshinespdis.com/s/Competencies-and-the-Colorado-Shines-PDIS>
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (2024). *Universal preschool program quality standards*. <https://cdec.colorado.gov/press-release/universal-preschool-quality-standards>
- Colorado Department of Early Childhood. (2025). *Apprenticeship program for early childhood educators*. <https://cdec.colorado.gov/apprenticeship-program>
- Colorado Shines Rating Administration. (2024) *Mena report*. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A783979870/EAIM?u=minn4020&sid=ebsco&xid=ea888727>

- Correia, N., Aguiar, C., & Amaro, F. (2021). Children's participation in early childhood education: A theoretical overview. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 24(3), 313-332. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120981789>
- Crawford, A., Varghese, C. A., Vaughn, K. A., Lewis, O., Bhavsar, V., Kumar, S., Penedo Silva, I., Ferrari, E., & Oh, Y. (2025). An Exploration of Continuous Quality Improvement Approaches within the Texas Quality Rating and Improvement System. *Early Education and Development*, 36(5), 1010–1031. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2025.2449691>
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory Into Practice*, 39(3), Article 124. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip3903_2
- Dalgaard, N. T., Bondebjerg, A., Klokke, R., A. Viinholt, B. C., & Dietrichson, J. (2022). Adult/child ratio and group size in early childhood education or care to promote the development of children aged 0–5 years: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews*, 18(2), Article 1239. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1239>
- Darling-Hammond, L., Flook, L., Cook-Harvey, C., Barron, B., & Osher, D. (2020). Implications for educational practice of the science of learning and development. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(2), 97–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791>

- Davis, E. E., & Sojourner, A. (2021). Increasing federal investment in children's early care and education to raise quality, access, and affordability. *Washington, DC: Hamilton Project.*
- DeHart, J. D. (2020). "It Is What It Is": Literacy Studies and Phenomenology. *The Qualitative Report, 25*(3), 596-603
- DePasquale, C. E., & Gunnar, M. R. (2020). Parental sensitivity and nurturance. *Future of Children, 30*(2), 53–70. <https://doi.org/10.1353/foc.2020.a807761>
- Desired Results. (2025). *Desired results developmental profile.*
<https://www.desiredresults.us/>
- Doromal, J.B., & Markowitz, A. J. (2023). Following the leader: Associations between leader support and teacher retention in childcare settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 65*, 250-260.<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.07.001>
- Douglass, A., & Kirby, G. (2022). *Evaluating leadership development in early care and education. OPRE brief #2022-141.* (ED626010). ERIC.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED626010.pdf>
- Douglass, A., Halle, T., Kirby, G., & Nagle, K. (2022). Recognizing and Supporting Early Childhood Educators and Program Administrators as Agents of Change: An Exploration of Distributed Leadership in Early Care and Education. Early Childhood Practice Brief. OPRE Report 2022-74. In *Administration for Children & Families.* <https://doi.org/10.3102/IP.22.1883383>
- Douglass, A., Tout, K., & Doyle, S. (2021). Considerations for incorporating the breakthrough series collaborative as a quality improvement methodology in early

childhood systems. OPRE report 2021-211. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation.

Drisko, J. W. (2025). Transferability and generalization in qualitative research. *Research on Social Work Practice, 35*(1), 102-110.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315241256560>

Duer, J. K., & Jenkins, J. (2023). Paying for preschool: who blends funding in early childhood education? *Educational Policy, 37*(7), Article 18571885.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048221103804>

Early Childhood Leadership Commission. (2024). *Pathways to success: Colorado's comprehensive early childhood workforce plan*. Colorado Department of Early Childhood. <https://www.earlychildhoodcolorado.org/ec-workforce-plan>

Egan, S. M., Pope, J., Moloney, M., Hoyne, C., & Beatty, C. (2021). Missing early education and care during the pandemic: The socioemotional impact of the COVID-19 crisis on young children. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 49*(5), 925-934. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01193-2>

Elek, C., Page, J., & Eadie, P. (2024). Identifying the theoretical foundations of coaching in early childhood education: A meta-narrative review. *Professional Development in Education, 1-21*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2024.2371862>

Farewell, C. V., Quinlan, J., Gonzales, L., & Puma, J. (2022). Changes in demands and resources faced by the early childhood education workforce due to COVID-19. *Journal of Early Childhood Research, 21*(1), 63-75.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1476718x221136463>

- Farnham, L., Nothmann, E., Tamaki, Z., & Daniels, C. (2020). Field building for population-level change: How funders and practitioners can increase the odds of success. The Bridgespan Group.
- Farquhar, J., Michels, N., & Robson, J. (2020). Triangulation in industrial qualitative case study research: Widening the scope. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 87, 160-170. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.indmarman.2020.02.001>
- Farrow, J., Wasik, B. A., & Hindman, A. H. (2024). Exploring the relations between teachers' high-quality language features and preschoolers' and kindergartners' vocabulary learning. *Journal of Child Language*, 1–29. <http://doi.org/10.1017/S0305000924000485>
- Finders, J., Wilson, E., & Duncan, R. (2023). Early childhood education language environments: Considerations for research and practice. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, Article 1202819. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1202819>
- Fonsén, E., Szecsi, T., Kupila, P., Liinamaa, T., Halpern, C., & Repo, M. (2022). Teachers' pedagogical leadership in early childhood education. *Educational Research*, 65(1), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2022.2147855>
- Ford, T. G., Kwon, K.-A., Lavigne, A. L., & McHugh, T. (2024). Testing a holistic framework of early care and education and K–12 leaders' working conditions and well-being. *AERA Open*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584241235923>
- Ford, T., Kwon, K., Lavigne, A. L., & McHugh, T. (2025). The working conditions and well-being of early childhood leaders in the United States. *Early Childhood*

Education Journal, 53(5), 1435–1450. [https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01677-](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-024-01677-x)

[x](#)

- Friedman-Krauss, A. H., Barnett, W. S., Garver, K. A., Hodges, K. S., Weisenfeld, G., G., Gardiner, B. A., & Jost, T. M. (2022). The State of Preschool 2021: State Preschool Yearbook. *National Institute for Early Education Research*.
- Fu, W. (2022). *A critical examination of effective leadership in early childhood education*. *Journal of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies*, 7(1). (EJ1396379).ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1396379.pdf>
- Gee, D. G., & Cohodes, E. M. (2023). Leveraging the developmental neuroscience of caregiving to promote resilience among youth exposed to adversity. *Development and Psychopathology*, 35(5), 2168-2185. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579423001128>
- Germuth, A. A. (2021). Professional development that changes teaching and improves learning. *Journal of Instructional Leadership*, 2(1), 45-62. <https://doi.org/10.46767/kfp.2016-0025>
- Ghandour, R. M., Hirai, A. H., Moore, K. A., Robinson, L. R., Kaminski, J. W., Murphy, K., Lu, M. C., & Kogan, M. D. (2021). Healthy and ready to learn: Prevalence and correlates of school readiness among United States preschoolers. *Academic Pediatrics*, 21(5), 818–829. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2021.02.019>
- Gibbs, L. (2020). Leadership emergence and development: Organizations shaping leading in early childhood education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 50(4), 672-693. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220940324>

- Grantham-Caston, M., & DiCarlo, C. F. (2023). Leadership styles in childcare directors. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *51*(1), 105-114.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01282-2>
- Greenberg, M. (2023). Evidence for social and emotional learning in schools [Brief]. Learning Policy Institute. <https://doi.org/10.54300/928.269>
- Grifenhagen, J. F., & Dickinson, D. K. (2023). Preparing pre-service early childhood teachers to support child language development. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*, *44*(1), 95–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2021.2015491>
- Griffin, R. A., Green, K. B., Ogletree, T. W., & Robbins, S. H. (2021). Supporting dual language learners through culturally responsive early childhood family education programs. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, *49*(3), 11–17.
- Grisham, J., Waddell, M., Crawford, R., & Toland, M. (2021). Psychometric properties of the assessment, evaluation, and programming system for infants and children (3rd ed.) (AEPS-3). *Journal of Early Intervention*, *43*(1), 24–37.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1053815120967359>
- Gross, D., Bettencourt, A. F., Taylor, K., Francis, L., Bower, K., & Singleton, D. L. (2020). What is parent engagement in early learning? Depends on who you ask. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, *29*(3), 747–760.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01680-6>
- Gruwell, C., & Ewing, R. (2023). Critical thinking in academic research. United States: Minnesota State Colleges and Universities.

Guba, E.G. (1981) Criteria for assessing trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries.

Educational Resources Information Center of Annual Review Paper, 29, 75-91.

Halpern, C., Szecsi, T., & Mak, V. (2021). "Everyone can be a leader": Early childhood education leadership in a center serving culturally and linguistically diverse children and families. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49(4), 669-679.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-020-01107-8>

Hancock, C. L., & Cheatham, G. A. (2021). Decision-making during early intervention home visits: From minimal to meaningful parent participation. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 35(1), 68-90.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2020.1782546>

Hanno, E. C., Gardner, M., Jones, S. M., & Lesaux, N. K. (2022). An ecological perspective on early educator well-being at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 60, 214-225.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.02.002>

Hayes, N., Halpenny, A. M., & O'Toole, L. (2022). Introducing Bronfenbrenner.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003247760>

Hemmeter, M. L., Ostrosky, M. M., & Fox, L. (2021). Unpacking the pyramid model. Brookes: Baltimore, MD, USA.

Hennink, M., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests, *Social Science & Medicine*, 292.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>.

- Herndon, M., & Waggoner, C. (2021). *Building resilience: Reducing the impact of adverse childhood experiences. Dimensions of Early Childhood, 49(1), 28–33.* (EJ1293704).ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1293704>
- Herrera, S., Phillips, B. M., Newton, Y. C., Dombek, J. L., & Hernandez, J. A. (2021). *Effectiveness of early literacy instruction: Summary of 20 years of research. (ED613947). ERIC. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED613947*
- Horn, D. M., Jeon, S., Clavijo, M. V., & Acton, M. (2022). Kindergarten through Grade 3 Outcomes Associated with Participation in High-Quality Early Care and Education: A RCT Follow-Up Study. *Education Sciences, 12(12), Article 908.* <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12120908>
- Irwin, V., De La Rosa, J., Wang, K., Hein, S., Zhang, J., Burr, R., Roberts, A., Barmer, A., Bullock Mann, F., Dilig, R., Parker, S., Nachazel, T., Barnett, M., & Purcell, S. (2022). *Report on the condition of education 2022. NCES 2022-144.* (ED619870).ERIC. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED619870.pdf>
- Jackson, C. J. (2020). Transformational leadership and gravitas: 2000 years of no development? *Personality and Individual Differences, 156, Article109760.* <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.109760>
- Jenkins, J. M., & Duncan, G. J. (2023). Skill building in early care and education programs. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 706 (1), 65-88.* <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162231197533>

- Jenkins, J. M., Duer, J. K., & Connors, M. (2021). Who participates in quality rating and improvement systems? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 54, 219-227.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2020.09.005>
- Jennings, P. A., Jeon, L., & Roberts, A. M. (2020). Introduction to the special issue on early care and education professionals' social and emotional well-being. *Early Education and Development*, 31(7), 933–939.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1809895>
- Johnson, A. D., Partika, A., Martin, A., Horm, D., & Phillips, D. A. (2023). A deeper dive, a wider pool: Preschool benefits sustain to first grade on a broader set of outcomes. *Child Development*, 94(5), 1298–1318.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13928>
- Kagan, S. L. (2020). Context matters: Lessons learned from the world's highest-performing early education systems. *Young Children (YC)*, 75(1), 22–31.
- Kea, C. D., Sirgany, L., & Young, F. (2025). Family engagement: Developing relationship-rich partnerships with culturally and linguistically diverse families to improve students' long-term life outcomes. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 57(3), 196–206. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599231175187>
- Kelton, R., & Talan, T. (2023). *We can't afford to lose leaders: Professional development to increase administrator retention during the first few years*. *Research brief*. (ED647644). ERIC. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED647644>

Kelton, R., & Tennis, I. (2025). *Leading under pressure: Stress, burnout, and commitment among novice ECEC administrators*. (ED672065). ERIC.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED672065>

Khan, H., Rehmat, M., Butt, T. H., Farooqi, S., & Asim, J. (2020). Impact of transformational leadership on work performance, burnout and social loafing: a mediation model. *Future Business Journal*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s43093-020-00043-8>

Kirby, G., Douglass, A., & Malone, L. (2023). Understanding and measuring leadership in center-based early care and education to inform policy and practice. OPRE brief, 177.

https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/ExCELS_LitReview_Brief.pdf

Kirby, G., Douglass, A., Lyskawa, J., Jones, C., & Malone, L. (2021). *Understanding leadership in early care and education: A literature review*. (ED613500). ERIC.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED613500>

Kriener-Althen, K., Newton, E. K., Draney, K., & Mangione, P. L. (2020). Measuring readiness for kindergarten using the desired results developmental profile. *Early Education and Development*, 31(5), 1–25.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1743160>

Kwan, P. (2020). Is transformational leadership theory passé? Revisiting the integrative effect of instructional leadership and transformational leadership on student outcomes. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 56(2), 321-349.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X19861137>

- Kwon, K. A., Malek, A., Horm, D., & Castle, S. (2020). Turnover and retention of infant-toddler teachers: Reasons, consequences, and implications for practice and policy. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *115*, Article 105061.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2020.105061>
- La Croix, L., Sanders Austin, K., Pegoraro Schull, C., Miller, S. E., & Kidd, J. K. (2024). Leveraging the environment to ignite children's literacy learning. National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/winter2024/leveraging-environment-for-literacy-learning>
- Lambert, R. G. (2020). *Technical manual for the teaching strategies, gold®*.
https://teachingstrategies.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/2020-Technical_Manual_GOLD.pdf
- Learning Policy Institute (2021). *Building a national early childhood education system that works*. (learningpolicyinstitute.org).
- LeBoeuf, W., Perrin, P., & Kennedy, S. (2020). *Colorado early childhood workforce 2020 plan. Colorado's early childhood workforce 2019 snapshot report*. Colorado Evaluation & Action Lab. <https://coloradolab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/ECE-Professionals-2019-Snapshot-Report.pdf>
- Lee, Y., Douglass, A., Zeng, S., Wiehe Lopes, A., & Reyes, A. (2022). Preparing early educators as frontline leaders and change agents with a leadership development initiative. *International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy*, *16*(1), 1-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-022-00095-z>

- Leithwood, K. (2021). A Review of evidence about equitable school leadership. *Education Sciences, 11*(8), Article 377. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080377>
- Levitt, H. M., Morrill, Z., Collins, K. M., & Rizo, J. L. (2021). The methodological integrity of critical qualitative research: Principles to support design and research review. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 68*(3), 357–370. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000523>
- Lewis, H. R., Lipscomb, S. T., Hatfield, B. E., Weber, R., Green, B., & Patterson, L. (2023). Family–teacher relationships and child engagement in early care and education. *Societies, 13*(3), Article 67. <https://doi.org/10.3390/soc13030067>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage Publications. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767\(85\)90062-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0147-1767(85)90062-8)
- Liu, S., Mendez Smith, J., Phillips, D., & Fisher, P. A. (2025). Childcare providers’ emotional distress links stressors to turnover intention: implications for rebuilding a healthy workforce. *Children and Youth Services Review, 178*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2025.108528>
- Liu, Y., & Yin, J. (2020). Stakeholder relationships and organizational resilience. *Management and Organization Review, 16*(5), 965-970. <https://doi.org/10.1017/mor.2020.58>
- Lopez, M., Ruiz, M. O., Rovnaghi, C. R., Tam, G. K., Hiscox, J., Gotlib, I. H., Barr, D. A., Carrion, V. G., & Anand, K. J. (2021). The social ecology of childhood and early life adversity. *Pediatric Research, 89*(2), 353-367. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-020-01264-x>

- Luby, J. L., Baram, T. Z., Rogers, C. E., & Barch, D. M. (2020). Neurodevelopmental optimization after early-life adversity: Cross-species studies to elucidate sensitive periods and brain mechanisms to inform early intervention. *Trends in Neurosciences*, 43(10), 744–751. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tins.2020.08.001>
- Luther, J. (2011). Academic readiness. In: Goldstein, S., Naglieri, J.A. (eds) Encyclopedia of child behavior and development. Springer, Boston, MA. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-0-387-79061-9_22
- Macy, M., Reid, M., & Macy, R. (2023). What are convergence and divergence in how parents and educators interpret child development When preschoolers transition to kindergarten? The dialog: *A Journal for Inclusive Early Childhood Professionals*, 26(2).<https://doi.org/10.55370/hsdialog.v26i2.1507>
- Macy, M., Rusiana, T.-A., Pool, J., Sawyer, M., & Chen, C.-I. (2022). A Preliminary examination of a kindergarten school readiness assessment. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(6), 1035–1046. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01237-7>
- Markowitz, A. J., Bassok, D., & Player, D. (2020). Simplifying quality rating systems in early childhood education. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 112, Article 104947. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104947>
- Markowitz, A. J., Mateus, D. M. C., & Weisner, K. (2024). Linking early educator wellbeing to classroom interactions and teacher turnover. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 67, 283–294. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2024.01.008>

- Martin, A. (2021). Reframing high-quality public preschool as a vehicle for narrowing child health disparities based on family income. *Academic Pediatrics, 21*(3), 389–397. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2020.07.004>
- Mason, K., Brown, A., & Carter, S. (2025). Capturing the complexities of collaborative partnerships in early childhood through metaphor. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 53*(1), 221–231. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01580-x>
- Maxwell, J. A., & Chmiel, M. (2014). Notes toward a theory of qualitative data analysis. *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis*, 21-34. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243.n2>
- McCormick, K. I., McMullen, M. B., & Lee, M. S. C. (2022). Early childhood professional well-being as a predictor of the risk of turnover in early head start and head start settings. *Early Education & Development, 33*(4), 567–588. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.1909915>
- McGowan, A. L., Chandler, M. C., & Gerde, H. K. (2023). Infusing physical activity into early childhood classrooms: Guidance for best practices. *Early Childhood Education Journal. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01532-5*
- McLean, C., McIsaac, J. L. D., Mooney, O., Morris, S. B., & Turner, J. (2023). A scoping review of quality in early childhood publicly-funded programs. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 51*(7), 1267–1278. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01372-9>
- Merrill, B., Cohen-Vogel, L., Little, M., Sadler, J., & Lee, K. (2020). “Quality” assurance features in state-funded early childhood education: [policy brief].

Children and Youth Services Review, *113*, Article 104972.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.104972>

Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.

Miller, S., Mendelson, T., Lee-Winn, A., Dyer, N. L., & Khalsa, S. B. S. (2020).

Systematic review of randomized controlled trials testing the effects of yoga with youth. *Mindfulness*, *11*(6), 1336–1353. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-019-01230-7>

Moedt, K., & Holmes, R. M. (2020). The effects of purposeful play after shared storybook readings on kindergarten children’s reading comprehension, creativity, and language skills and abilities. *Early Child Development and Care*, *190*(6), 839–854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2018.1496914>

Mondi, C. F., Giovanelli, A., & Reynolds, A. J. (2021). Fostering socioemotional learning through early childhood intervention. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Resilience*, *15*(6). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40723-021-00084-8>

Morrissey, T. (2020). Addressing the need for affordable, high-quality early childhood care and education for all in the United States. Washington Center for Equitable Growth. <https://equitablegrowth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Morrissey.pdf>

Morse J. M. “Data were saturated ”. *Qualitative Health Research*. 2015; *25*(5):587-588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732315576699>

Movahedazarhouli, S., Banerjee, R., & Luckner, J. (2021). An examination of current leadership practices in early childhood and early childhood special education: A

mixed methods study. *Early Education & Development*, 33(4), 700–722.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2021.1909937>

Muir, R. A., Howard, S. J., & Kervin, L. (2023). Interventions and approaches targeting early self-regulation or executive functioning in preschools: A systematic review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 35(1), 1–32.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-023-09740-6>

Mweshi, G. K., & Sakyi, K. (2020). Application of sampling methods for the research design. *Archives of Business Research*, 8(11), 180–193.

<https://doi.org/10.14738/abr.811.9042>

Myran, S., & Masterson, M. (2020). Training early childhood leaders: developing a new paradigm for professional development using a practice-to-theory approach. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 32(2), 173–196.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2020.1803924>

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators*.

[https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/professional_standards_and_competencies_for_early_childhood_educators.pdf)

[shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/professional_standards_and_competencies_for_early_childhood_educators.pdf)

[statements/professional_standards_and_competencies_for_early_childhood_educ-](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/professional_standards_and_competencies_for_early_childhood_educators.pdf)

[ators.pdf](https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/professional_standards_and_competencies_for_early_childhood_educators.pdf)

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020a). *DAP: Defining developmentally appropriate practice*. [https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-](https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements)

[statements](https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements)

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020b). *DAP: Planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to achieve meaningful goals.*

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/planning-curriculum>

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020c). *DAP: Demonstrating professionalism as an early childhood educator.*

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/professionalism>

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020d). *DAP: Teaching to enhance each child's development and learning.*

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/enhance-development>

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2024). *We are not ok: Early childhood educators and families face rising challenges as relief funds expire.*

https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/our-work/public-policy-advocacy/feb_2024_brief_wearenok_final_1.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). *Report on the condition of education*

<https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2024/2024144.pdf>

Nguyen, T., Reich, S. M., Jenkins, J. M., & Abedi, J. (2020). Psychometric validation and reorganization of the desired results developmental profile. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 38(3), 369-388.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0734282919859804>

Nigro, L., & Ward-Seidel, A. (2024). Reimagining early childhood education and school readiness through the perspectives of historically marginalized families living in a

rural community. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 0(0).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14639491241293479>

Nyamesem, C., Puni- Amie A., Perry, & Atilas, J. T. (2025). Child Care Centers

Licensing Standards in the United States from 1981 to 2023. *Early Childhood*

Education Journal, 53(1), 99–108. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-023-01569-6>

OECD. (2020). Building a High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

Workforce. TALIS. <https://doi.org/10.1787/b90bba3d-en>

Orellana, C. K., & Chaitanya, A. (2020). Striving for equity: Community-engaged

teaching and learning through a community practitioner and faculty coteaching

model. *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, 24(2), 85–106.

Osher, D., Cantor, P., Berg, J., Steyer, L., & Rose, T. (2020). Drivers of human

development: How relationships and context shape learning and

development¹. *Applied Developmental Science*, 24(1), 6–36.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1398650>

Parker, R., Thomsen, B. S., & Berry, A. (2022). Learning through play at school: A

framework for policy and practice. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 751801.

<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.751801>

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage

Publications.

Peel, Karen L. (2020). A beginner's guide to applied educational research using thematic

analysis. *Practical Assessment Research and Evaluation*. 25 (1).

<https://doi.org/10.7275/ryr5-k983>

- Perlman, M., Howe, N., Gulyas, C., & Falenchuk, O. (2020). Associations between directors' characteristics, supervision practices and quality of early childhood education and care classrooms. *Early Education and Development, 31*(4), 507–523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2019.1679006>
- Pettoello-Mantovani, M., Bali, D., Sevketoglu, E., Pastore, M., Vural, M., & Giardino, I. (2025). The first thousand days: Nourishing the developing brain for a lifetime of mental well-being. Narrative review. *Global Pediatrics, 100270*.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gped.2025.100270>
- Phillips, S. M., & Tucker, P. (2025). Executive function of preschoolers: the role of physical fitness and movement behaviors. *Pediatric Research*.
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41390-025-04132-8>
- Poppe, J., Thorman, A., & Weyer, M. (2020). *Improving early childhood education systems*. [Policy brief]. Education Commission of the States.
https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Improving_Early_Childhood_Education_Systems.pdf
- Portobello Institute. (2024). Top trends in early childhood education in 2024. [Portobello Institute](#)
- Powers, J. N., Cochenour, L. E., Farewell, C. V., & Puma, J. E. (2025). The association of social support and burnout among head start staff in Colorado. *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10901027.2025.2464682>

- Purper, C. J., Thai, Y., Frederick, T. V., & Farris, S. (2023). Exploring the challenge of teachers' emotional labor in early childhood settings. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 51(4), 781–789. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01345-y>
- Pyle, A., Wickstrom, H., Gross, O., & Kraszewski, E. (2024). Supporting literacy development in kindergarten through teacher-facilitated play. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X231221363>
- Rahn, N. L., Croix, L. L., Shin, D. L., Gravil, M., Chen, I., Hix-Small, H., Arora, S., Grisham, J., Rutland, J. H., Chai, Z., Mickelson, A. M., & Xie, H. (2024). Using an online assessment tool to teach authentic assessment to early childhood teacher candidates. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/87568705241249472>
- Rand, M. K., & Morrow, L. M. (2021). The Contribution of play experiences in early literacy: Expanding the science of reading. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 56(1), S239–S248. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.383>
- Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. C. (2021). *Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.
- Read, M. A. (2023). Color, form, and light: Recommendations for design of ECE classrooms based on group structure and activity type. *Creative Education*, 14(9), 1826-1846. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ce.2023.149117>
- Ricciardi, C., Manfra, L., Hartman, S., Bleiker, C., Dineheart, L., & Winsler, A. (2021). School readiness skills at age four predict academic achievement through 5th

grade. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 57, 110–120.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.05.006>

Robinson, L. E., Watson, K. R., Fensterstock, N., Hogenkamp, S., Xu, Y., Garner, H., Warri, V. R., Morgan, C. H., Garcia, A. A., Wu, C., Dunn, D., Espelage, D. L., Astor, R. A., McMahon, S. D., Reddy, L. A., Anderman, E. M., Worrell, F. C., & Martinez, A. (2025). School safety concerns and solutions: A qualitative analysis of U.S. school psychologists' perspectives. *Behavioral Sciences*, 15(2), Article 228. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs15020228>

Rodd, J. (2020). Leadership in early childhood: The pathway to professionalism.

Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003116295>

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2021). Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Saldaña, J. (2013). The coding manual for qualitative researchers. Los Angeles, CA:

SAGE Publications.

Schaack, D. D., Donovan, C. V., Adejumo, T., & Ortega, M. (2022). To stay or to leave:

Factors shaping early childhood teachers' turnover and retention

decisions. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 36(2), 327-345.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02568543.2021.1955779>

Schaack, D. D., Le, V.-N., & Stedron, J. (2020). When fulfillment is not enough: Early

childhood teacher occupational burnout and turnover intentions from a job

demands and resources perspective. *Early Education and Development*, 31(7),

1011-1030. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2020.1791648>

Schaeffing, A., Tucker, B., Hartline, L., Rosenthal, L., & Brown-Franklyn, D. (2025).

Building Responsive & Sustainable Early Educator Apprenticeship Programs.

Schmid, E., Garrels, V., & Skåland, B. (2024). The continuum of rapport: Ethical

tensions in qualitative interviews with vulnerable participants. *Qualitative*

Research, 24(5), 1253-1271. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941231224600>

Schoch, A. D., Gerson, C. S., Halle, T., & Bredeson, M. (2023). *Children's learning and*

development benefits from high-quality early care and education: A summary of

the evidence. Research highlight. OPRE report 2023-226 (ED639941). ERIC.

<https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED639941>

Scott, C. L., & Klein, L. B. (2022). Advancing traditional leadership theories by

incorporating multicultural and workforce diversity leadership traits, behaviors,

and supporting practices: Implications for organizational leaders. *Journal of*

Leadership, Accountability & Ethics, 19(3), 1–11.

<https://doi.org/10.33423/jlae.v19i3.5320>

Shelton, T., Palmer, K., Brown, S., Salaway, J., Yeager, T., & Spadafora, E. (2022).

Improving the quality of early childhood education (ECE) training through

collaborative community partnerships. *Collaborations: A Journal of Community-*

Based Research and Practice, 5(1), Article 11. <https://doi.org/10.33596/coll.95>

Shore, R. A., Lambert, R. G., & Shue, P. L. (2021). An Evaluation of leadership

professional development for early childhood directors. *Leadership & Policy in*

Schools, 20(4), 690–703. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2020.1734629>

- Slicker, G., Whitaker, A. A., & Tang, J. (2023). Center-based early care and education programs and quality indicators: A latent class analysis. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 63*, 59-72. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2022.11.006>
- St. Laurent, C. W., Lokhandwala, S., Allard, T., Ji, A., Riggins, T., & Spencer, R. M. C. (2022). Influence of naps on sedentary time and physical activity in early childhood. *Scientific Reports, 12*(1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-022-25628-x>
- Stahl, N. A., & King, J. R. (2020). Expanding approaches for research: Understanding and using trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Developmental Education, 44*(1), 26–28.
- Starr, E. J., Hatton, H., Clark, C. A. C., Parra, G. R., Avari, P., & Brock, R. L. (2025). Reducing emotion dysregulation through a mindfulness intervention: The moderating role of occupational stress for early childhood educators. *Mindfulness*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-025-02644-2>
- Stehle Wallace, E., Senter, R., Peterson, N., Dunn, K. T., & Chow, J. (2022). How to establish a language-rich environment through a collaborative SLP–teacher partnership. *TEACHING Exceptional Children, 54*(3), 166-176. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059921990690>
- Stein, R., Garay, M., & Nguyen, A. (2024). It matters: Early childhood mental health, educator stress, and burnout. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 52*(2), 333–344. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-022-01438-8>

- Susanto, P. C., Agusinta, L., Setyawati, A., & Rettrisunz Pim Panjaitan, A. (2023). Determinant organization commitment and development organization: Analysis servant leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership. *Formosa Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 2(3), 541–558.
<https://doi.org/10.55927/fjmr.v2i3.3356>
- Sussman, J., Gochyyev, P., Kriener-Althen, K., Newton, E., & Mangione, P. (2022). DRDP Technical Report for Early Infancy Through Kindergarten.
- Talan, T. N., & Magid, M. A. R. I. N. A. (2021). Closing the leadership gap: 2021 status update on early childhood program leadership in the United States. *McCormick Center for Early Childhood Leadership*. <https://mccormickcenter.nl.edu/library/closing-the-leadership-gap-113021> .
- Taylor, M. E., & Boyer, W. (2020). Play-based learning: Evidence-based research to improve children’s learning experiences in the kindergarten classroom. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 48(2), 127–133. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00989-7>
- Teaching Strategies Gold (2023). *Teaching Strategies GOLD*.
<https://teachingstrategies.com/solutions/assess/gold/>.
- Temple, J. A., Ou, S.-R., & Reynolds, A. J. (2022). Closing achievement gaps through preschool-to-third-grade programs. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, Article 871973.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.871973>
- Thompson, G., Buch, R., Thompson, P.-M. M., & Glasø, L. (2021). The impact of transformational leadership and interactional justice on follower performance and

- organizational commitment in a business context. *Journal of General Management*, 46(4), 274-283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306307020984579>
- Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. L. (2025). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Toland, M., Grisham, J., Waddell, M., Crawford, R., & Dueber, D. (2022). Scale evaluation and eligibility determination of a field test version of the assessment, evaluation, and programming system, (3rd ed.). *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 42(2), 150- 161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0271121420981712>
- van Knippenberg, D., & van Ginkel, W. P. (2022). A Diversity Mindset Perspective on Inclusive Leadership. *Group and Organization Management*, 47(4), 779–797. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601121997229>
- von Suchodoletz, A., Lee, D. S., Henry, J., Tamang, S., & Premachandra, B. (2023). Early childhood education and care quality and associations with child outcomes: A meta-analysis. *PLOS ONE*, 18(10), Article e0293056. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0285985>
- Walker, D., Sepulveda, S. J., Hoff, E., Rowe, M. L., Schwartz, I. S., Dale, P. S., Peterson, C. A., Diamond, K., Goldin-Meadow, S., Levine, S. C., Wasik, B. H., Horm, D. M., & Bigelow, K. M. (2020). Language intervention research in early childhood care and education: A systematic survey of the literature. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 50, 68-85. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2019.02.010>
- Walsh, B., Smith, L., & Mercado, K. (2023). Integrated efficient early care and education systems.

- Watts, T., Ibrahim, D., Khader, A., Li, C., Gandhi, J., & Raver, C. (2020). Exploring the impacts of an early childhood educational intervention on later school selection. *Educational Researcher*, 49(8), 620-635.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20935060>
- Wei, Y., Wang, L., Tang, Y., Deng, H., Su, J., & Li, Q. (2024). Enhancing young children's executive function through physical activities: a three-level meta-analysis. *Mental Health and Physical Activity*, 26, 100592.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mhpa.2024.100592>
- Whitaker, A. A., Jenkins, J. M., & Duer, J. K. (2022). Standards, curriculum, and assessment in early childhood education: Examining alignment across multiple state systems. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 58, 59-74.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2021.07.008>Get rights and content
- Whittaker, J. E., Hofkens, T., Vitiello, V. E., Pianta, R. C., DeCoster, J., & Ansari, A. (2024). Patterns of children's readiness at school entry and their association with kindergarten academic and social-emotional outcomes: Do classroom interactions matter? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 66, 112-123.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2023.09.005>
- Williams, D. S., & Mulrooney, K. (2021). Guardians in the Nursery: The Role of Early Childhood Educators in Fostering Infant and Young Children's Positive Mental Health. *ZERO TO THREE*, 41(3), 10-16.
- Xu, A., Baysari, M. T., Stocker, S. L., Leow, L. J., Day, R. O., & Carland, J. E. (2020). Researchers' views on, and experiences with, the requirement to obtain informed

consent in research involving human participants: a qualitative study. *BMC*

Medical Ethics, 21(1), Article 93. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-020-00538-7>

Zaslow, M., Halle, T., Madill, R., & Forry, N. (2024). History of the national survey of early care and education, part I: The development of the 2012 NSECE. OPRE report #2024-009. Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my research study. Before we get started, I would like to share some information about myself, the reason why I am doing this study which is for my doctoral dissertation, and the purpose of the study which is to collect data about the perceptions of early childhood directors related to their role as a director, education, training and development practices and needs and the development of high-quality programs and teaching teams.

I wanted you to know that I have a specific definition of what an early childhood director is, which is a person with influence on the climate of their programs and the development of high-quality teams. As you answer my questions, please keep this definition in mind.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview as a part of the study. This interview will last approximately 30 to 60 minutes. This interview will provide a clear understanding of your perceptions as a director of a center-based early childhood program located in Colorado. All the information gathered for this study will be anonymous and kept confidential.

I will begin the interview process by starting an audio recording of our interview, so that I may later transcribe the interview. This will ensure that I have an accurate record of what you are sharing with me in this interview.

Before we get started, do you have any questions?

[START RECORDING]

Background, Screening, and Introductory Questions

Before we get started with the official interview questions, I would like to ask you a few introductory questions to get to know a bit about you and to confirm your initial qualifying criteria for the study.

- Initially you indicated you are the director of a center-based early childhood program. How long have you been employed at this current center?
- You previously stated that you have some education and training in leadership. What specific leadership training have you obtained?

Option A: Thank you, Let Us get started with the interview questions.

Option B: If the person chooses not to continue to participate, I will thank them for their time and end the interview process.

Transition

My first group of questions relates to you and your program.

How long have you been in the role of ECE director in this state?

How many individuals are you currently leading in your program?

Transition: The next set of questions relates to your experience and how it relates to the experiences and training of successful ECE directors

RQ 1	IQ	My Notes/Alignment to FW
How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe their experiences with training and development for their current leadership role?	IQ 1 In your experience, how are directors prepared for success before taking a director position in the field	Idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration

	<p>Probing question: Am I correct in saying you have personal experience with director preparation and if so, what specific preparation did you receive?</p>	
	<p>IQ 2 Describe ways, if any, that you feel your experience, training, and development have supported you in your role as a director?</p>	<p>Idealized Influence, Inspirational motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration</p>
	<p>Is it true to say you have specific training and development that support you in your role as a director if so, what specific training and development has supported you in your role?</p>	
	<p>IQ 3 What additional experience, training, and development, if any, do you feel would help you to be more successful in your role as a director?</p>	<p>Idealized influence, Inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation, and Individualized consideration.</p>
	<p>Probing question: Why do you feel this experience, training, and development would be helpful?</p>	
	<p>IQ 4 What if any, limitations did you experience in obtaining education, training, and development to be successful in your role as a director</p>	<p>Intellectual stimulation, Idealized influence</p>
	<p>Prompt: What effects do you think this has on directors</p>	
RQ 2	IQ	My Notes/Alignment to FW

How do current ECE directors in Colorado describe the support, training, and resources needed to develop ECE directors and lead high-quality programming?	IQ 1 In your experience, what is a high-quality teaching team	Individualized consideration, Inspirational motivation, and Intellectual stimulation
Probing question <i>Am I</i> correct in saying you have personal experience providing professional development to teachers? If		
IQ 2 Describe ways, if any, that you feel your experiences, training, and development have supported you in developing high-quality teaching teams		Idealized influence, Inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation
Probing question Why do you feel this experience, training, and development supported you?		
IQ 3 What additional experiences, training, and development do you wish you could have acquired, if any, to help you in developing teams?		Idealized influence, Inspirational motivation, Intellectual stimulation, and Individualized consideration
Probing question: Why do you feel this would be better to help you?		

Final Interview Question

Is there anything else about your experiences and training that you wish to share with me?

Closing Script

Thank you for your participation in this interview session. Your time and perceptions are appreciated. I will summarize my notes and understanding and your expressed responses so that you can clarify, add, or omit any of your comments to add to the credibility of your input and my understanding of what you have presented.

Appendix B: Coding Table

Table B1*Coding Table*

Themes	Categories	Codes
1) Participants felt unprepared for an ECE directorship	Preparation Formal training Formal education	Not prepared, no preparation, no formal education, no formal training, no training specific to directors and leadership, prior knowledge of being a director
2) Multiple pathways to becoming a director	Becoming a director On-the-job-training	PDIS Training, ECE degrees, various prior positions, teacher, assistant teacher, assistant director, fell into the position, termination of current director, previous director left, owner became a director

3) ECE directors reported challenges with the time and economics of training and work-life balance	Challenges Time Family Financial	Too many responsibilities as a director, No time for studies, being a director takes up all the time, unable to provide additional support due to time, training and work-life balance, single parent, pregnancy, young children, personal life obstacles, burden on family, primary caregiver, balancing family life and education, student loan debt, income vs education costs, low wages, other financial obligations, financial responsibility of college, every 5 years must update courses to keep credential.
4) Directors need additional supports specific	Needed training	Mentoring, coaching, networking, collaboration,

to their position to ensure	Professional development	Shared learning,
high-quality programming	Training and support	professional collaboration,
		problem-solving, reflective
		coaching, reflective
		consultation, licensing,
		state resources
